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TRIPLE WESTERN

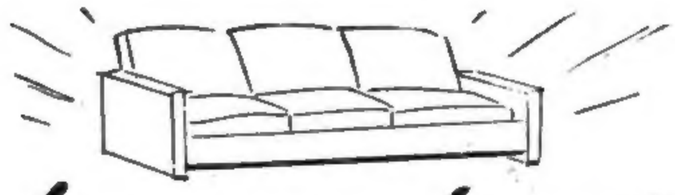
THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

The WHITE WOLF
by MAX BRAND

The MAN from PAINTED ROCK
by JACKSON GREGORY

Night Riders
by GLADWELL RICHARDSON

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



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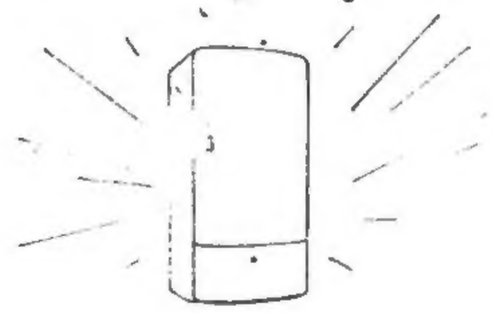

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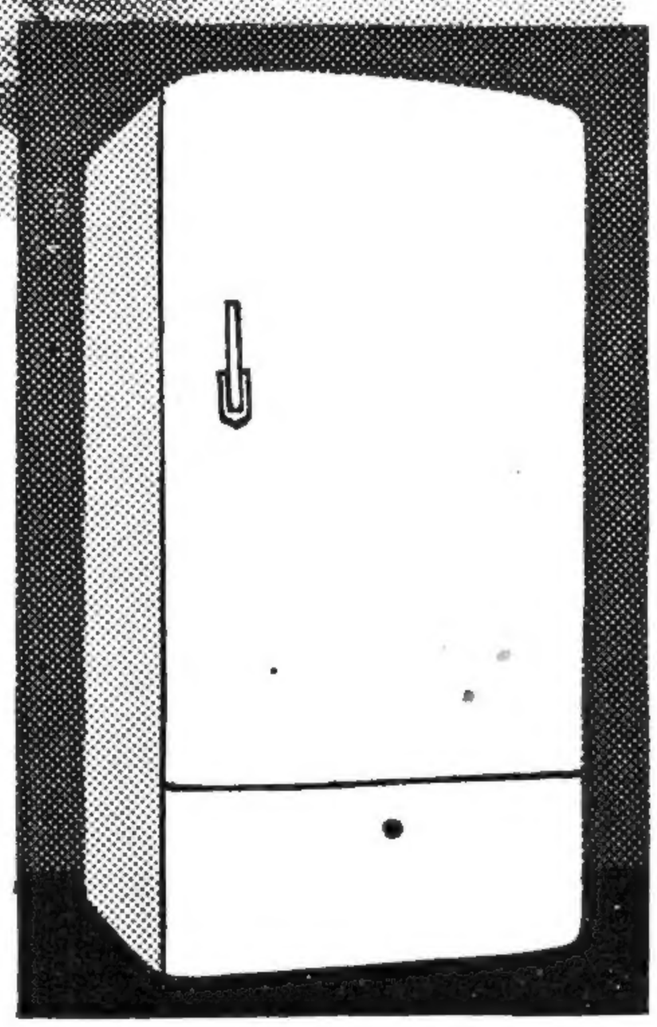

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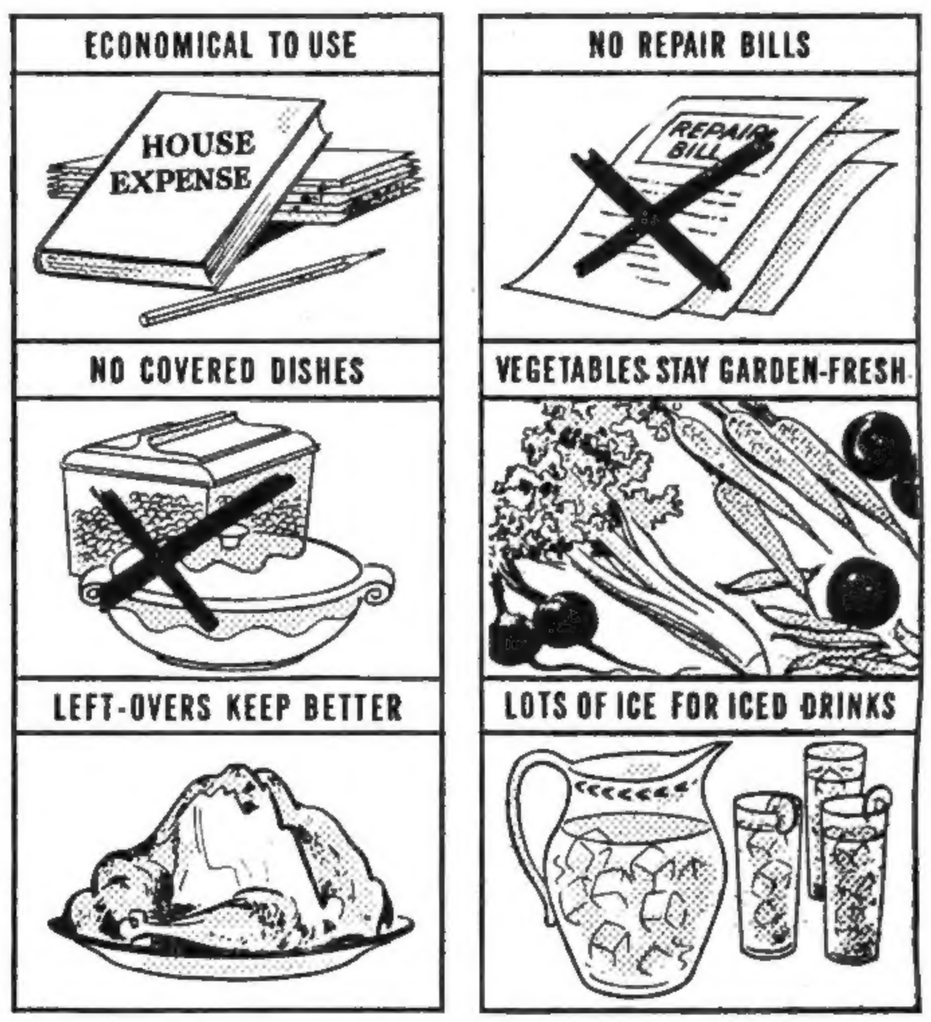

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THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 7, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION AUGUST, 1950

THE WHITE WOLF

Orphaned in the wilds and mothered by a wolf, a valiant bull terrier soon becomes the king of the pack—but finally hears the compelling call of man's companionship in this tense and primitive drama of the snow-clad outlands!

MAX BRAND 9

THE MAN FROM PAINTED ROCK

Dudelike Jim Sherrod buys himself a rangeful of gun trouble, but his fancy clothes don't stop him from going into swift action when he finds there's a nestful of thieving rustlers and vicious killers to clean up in a hurry!

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NIGHT RIDERS

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The Trail Boss

A FRIENDLY GET-TOGETHER FOR ALL HANDS!

HOWDY, Trail Hands! Shuck your hardware, loosen your belt a notch and bunch up around the fire while we put on a fresh pot of coffee.

It's good to see the crowd growing at these little get-togethers. Speaking of hardware, everybody knows that guns—particularly hand guns—played a dramatic part in the history of the golden West. Not so generally known is the fact that few oldtime cowboys wore them either for ornament or deeds of derring-do. They packed their six shooters because they were necessary in the everyday business of the early range.

Such tricks as blasting the streets of a sleepy cowtown on a Saturday evening hullaballoo was sheer exuberance on the cowboy's part. The rest of the time working the range, roping and branding stock encumbered by a heavy revolver sagging at his hip was not pimarily of the cowboy's choosing. He carried that gun to save his own skin.

Cow Business Was Dangerous

Cow business, especially in the pioneer era of the fractious, half-wild longhorn, was dangerous. There were times when a big, powerful longhorn bull resented being roped, or driven into a gather at roundup time. On such occasions he was apt to wheel and charge full tilt at the cowboy and his horse.

Maybe the fellow in the saddle could wheel his mount and dodge the slashing horns. Maybe he couldn't. Then to avoid being gored to death or seriously maimed his only recourse was to draw his gun and down the maddened longhorn in its tracks. Such a move required quick action and fast and accurate shooting. But it was all in a day's work for the cowboy.

There were other reasons too why the hand gun was as much a part of the old-time cowboy's equipment as his horse, rope and saddle. Sick, maimed, or impossibly bogged-down cow critters frequently had to be shot and killed where they were encountered by a lone rider checking the vast miles of his boss's far-reaching grazing lands. Sometimes the guns were called into play to turn or head off a stampede.

Often rattlesnakes had to be scotched. In the big game mountain sections of the northern cattle country, perhaps it was a bear with a sudden lust for slaughtering young calves that had to be done away with.

Those were mainly the first reasons for gun-toting on the range.

Rough and Rugged Times

The trouble, the fights with rustlers, wide-loopers, brand changers and the tense individual gun duels in town and out were an outgrowth of the conditions of the times, the inherent cussedness of *homo sapiens*, and the fact that practically everybody wore hardware at his hip. In the beginning at least they were not the cause of this almost universal gun-toting, but its effect.

As naturally as night follows day since it was necessary for the cowboy to be armed for his own protection on the early range, it was every bit as essential that he knew how to use—and use expertly—the artillery he carried. Times were as rough and rugged as the longhorns he herded. So were many of the men who moved out to the range country.

In a new, untamed land where openly going armed did not of itself denote either a law officer or a man with criminal intent, it was inevitable that the wilder element should move in—and in some cases attempt to take over. But though counting on being able to wear arms with the anonymity of

honest citizens the gun toughs overlooked one highly important fact.

Easy to Raise a Posse

The citizens themselves not only carried guns, but knew how to use them as well. Sheriffs had no trouble raising posses of expert gunmen when trouble brewed. When the final showdown came, as it always did sooner or later, the outlaws found themselves pitted not merely against a few gun-trained law officers but against a gun-familiar citizenry.

In spite of occasional spectacular individual careers, the bad boys always lost out in the end. Law and order and decency prevailed. The West grew up to fulfill its destiny as a rich and richly colorful part of our great nation.

Except in the more isolated sections few ranch hands carry six guns as part of the paraphernalia of their job today. They don't need them.

A Tamer Breed

The blaze-face Hereford, chunky beef-producer that he is, is a far tamer and less dangerous animal than the old-time longhorn he superceded. Moreover on modern fenced and cross-fenced ranches much of the cattle handling, branding, dehorning and so forth is done in chutes and corrals.

Riders in the tangled brush and mesquite country of lower southwest Texas and cowboys covering risky mountain or difficult canyon-cut territory for outlying spreads are about the only ones left who still regularly carry a shooter in their daily work.

They pack guns for the same reason the first cowboys did—protection. They know there is always the off chance that their horse might stumble and fall with them underneath. Or some other mishap might occur that would cause them to get thrown and possibly dragged across sharp rocks or through thick brush. In such cases the presence of their ever-ready hand-guns and a quick shot could well be the means of saving their lives.

Poker Face's Pals

I once asked my old friend, the lanky handle-bar mustached former Texas top

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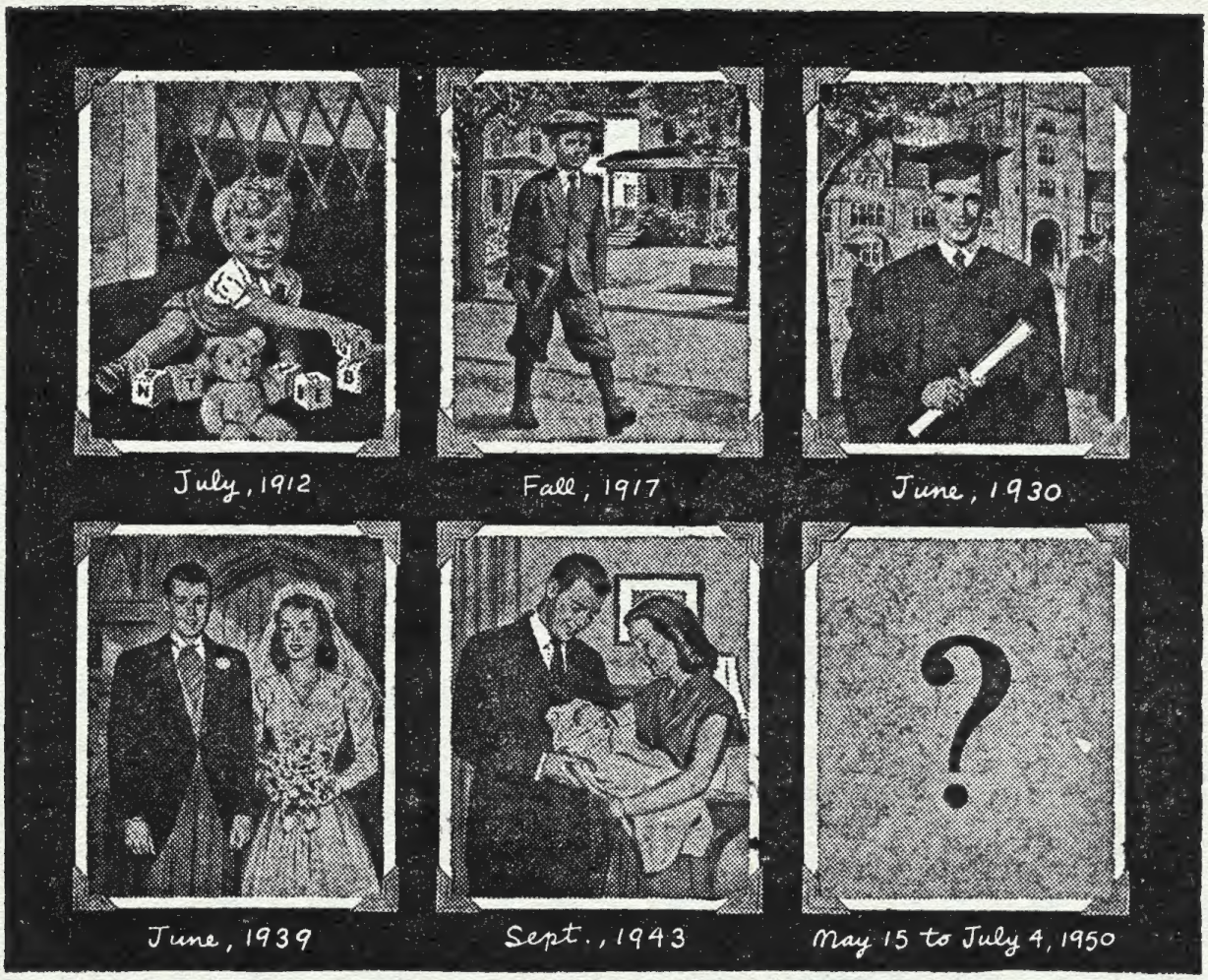

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A NOVEL OF THE OUTLANDS

BY MAX BRAND

Copyright, 1926, by Dorothy Faust, and originally published by G. P. Putnam's Sons

THE WHITE WOLF

I

IN AN upper box-canyon of the Winnemago River, Gannaway saw the big man first. Adam Gannaway himself was big and hard muscled from wandering across the ridges of the Rockies on his work as meteorologist, but as Tucker Crosden strode closer, Gannaway felt himself shrinking into the dimensions of a boy. This Crosden walked with a steelshod

Orphaned in the wilds and mothered by a wolf, a valiant bull terrier becomes king of the pack—but hears the call of man's companionship!

staff so long and stout that it reminded Gannaway of the rough-hewn spear of some early hero, and compared with the man's bulk the little burro Crosden drove before him seemed more like a dog than a beast of burden.

The burro was loaded with a heavy pack, and spent by the long struggle up steep canyons.

When they reached Gannaway the giant let it stop to rest.

"Have you got the makings, stranger?" he rumbled.

Gannaway handed over a package of brown papers and a little Bull Durham in the bottom of a sack. When Crosden's smoke was lighted, he went to the burro's pack and took from an open hamper a big female bull terrier, heavy with young. The giant followed her to the Winnemago and watched her drink. Then he lifted her carefully and brought her to the top of the bank. She thanked him with a wag of the tail and lift of the ears, then went slowly off through the grass.

"She's a fine specimen," observed Gannaway. "That bitch has championship stuff in her."

"She's a champion, right enough," the big man said sourly.

"Where did she win?" asked Gannaway.

The giant turned his back. "It's time to move. Come here, Nell!" As she came obediently, the big man finished his cigarette. "Got another makings?" he asked.

"No," said Gannaway. "That's the last."

"All right," said the giant. "Pipe tobacco, then."

"I'm out of that, too."

The big fellow stared. "You ain't been giving away your last smoke?"

"I've gone without it before," said Gannaway.

The giant looked as though unable to believe in such generosity.

"Why, hell, man," he exclaimed, "you must be white! Have you got a pipe?"

"Yes."

"Then—fill her up!"

He dragged out a well-filled pouch, and as Gannaway gladly filled his pipe, the stranger surveyed him with wonder.

"She's Barnsbury Lofty Lady the Second," he broke out at last, "and she got her championship in New York, like the rest of my breed. I don't bother with none of the little country shows. The big stuff, or nothing."

"An expensive business, that—shipping the dogs so far," suggested Gannaway.

"Oh—ay, it costs money, but I get enough for my dogs out of the traps. I sell enough furs to keep the dogs pretty good. The family don't like it. But damn the family!"

"She's a good-looking bitch," the scientist repeated. "By the way, my name is Gannaway."

"Gannaway," said the trapper. "I dunno what your business is, but it ain't dogs. Well, she's good-looking enough for most. They wrote her up when she went East. They give her cups, and they offered me big money for her. Three thousand dollars. But money ain't gonna touch *her*. It ain't what she is. It's the hope that's locked up in her!"

"And that?" asked Gannaway gently.

A smile of singular beauty spread over the giant's face.

"The King!" he whispered. "She's got the blood of The King in her, and maybe that blood'll come out in this here very litter!"

THEY traveled together up the valley until in the evening they reached the lower Winnemago hills and camped among the pines. In the morning they must part, but Gannaway determined to learn, if craft and patience could help him, why any man should peril the life of a three-thousand-dollar dog in the cold winds of the mountains—and the lives of her pups also.

It was not, however, until supper had been cooked and eaten that the tongue of Crosden was loosened.

"Whatever else they may say about her, she has a perfect head," said Gannaway.

"A perfect head?" echoed Crosden softly. "Once there was a perfect dog. You hear me, Gannaway? You might understand, so I'll tell you the story. Back in the beginning, see, there wasn't nobody much except Newton and me. The others had dogs, and they got their

ADAM GANNAWAY

championships, but nobody knew the secret of putting a head on a bull terrier but me—and Newton, he stole my idea. He seemed to understand, too. The bitches are what count. You can have the best stud dogs in the world and get nothing.

"Newton knew, and he knew that I knew, and I would go and look at Newton's dogs, and he would come and look at mine. And each of us knew that the other fellow was coming pretty close to the real thing—a dog that would be a dog.

"We got our championships, and we kept watching each other. Finally one time when I got to Madison Square Garden I seen Newton go by with a guilty look in his eye and I reached out and grabbed him.

" 'Keep off of me!' says he. 'Who's been talking to you?'

"All at once, I guessed that he had beat me out. 'You take me back and lemme see it!' said I. So he took me back and he opened a crate and he snapped his fingers and out jumped—the perfect dog!

" 'Newt,' I said, 'you've done it!'

"Well, he looked up and he shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'I used to think she might come to it when she was a pup. But take another look at her, partner. You see what's wrong?'

"I looked at the bitch and I seen that she was a mite off in the head.

" 'What is her name?' says I.

" 'The only name she's got,' says he, 'is The Queen.'

"Well, she deserved that name, and she went on and got best terrier in the show. But Newton, he comes to me afterward, and says: 'Crosden, damned if I ain't shot my bolt. Somethin' tells me I ain't gonna never get no higher with my dogs than what I've done already. The Queen, she's my best bet, unless I go get new blood. What about taking one of your dogs for breeding to her, old-timer?'

"He hated to do it, but he had to. So we picked out the best of my lot—Champion Barnsbury Moonstone—and I was over to Newton's place in Colorado when the litter was born. The first was to go to Newton, the second to me, and so on. Five was born, and they was nothing to shout about. Then there was a whole hour, and finally the last of the litter come, and belonged to me! And Newton, he give him one look and said: 'Look here, old partner! I hate to see you let down this here way. You take this here first born dog, and I'll keep the little rat—or drown him—one of the two!'

"I just looked at Newton and I laughed. 'No, old son,' I said. 'You can have the other four, but I'll stay by this here one!'

"I named him The King, and when he was three months old he had the stand of a dog that was carved out of marble. When he was seven months old, he was that close to perfect you could hardly of drawed a line between him and perfec-

tion. Newton and me, we took a special trip to New York for the big show. The dog was in my arms when, going around a curve, we hit somethin'—"

Gannaway could not take his eyes from the tortured face of his companion. After a pause, the big man went on:

"I buried him and I come back and I tied up my dogs in a line and I shot 'em down, every one! I come into my house and I called my wife and my girl and I told 'em to go out and bury the mess. But pretty soon Molly, which is my girl, she come in and she said: 'Daddy, there is one living.'

" 'I'll fix it,' says I, and started out.

"It was a little two-month-old bitch. Molly, she drops down and grabs it up.

" 'Oh, Daddy,' says she, 'God don't mean you to kill it!'

"I says to myself maybe she was right. So, when the time come around, I bred her to Newton's dog, Champion Silverside. Then I got to thinking what my dogs always needed was a rougher life, out in the wilds, y'understand, like other animals. So I thought I'd take Nelly up here into the mountains and raise her litter while I was trapping. And that's why you see her with me, now!"

"Perhaps there'll be another King?" murmured Gannaway, but the giant said nothing. . . .

LA SOMBRA was in a dreamy mood. With one half-opened eye she was watching her husband, the great Black Wolf himself, on the mountain shoulder, when suddenly she saw him stand stiffly erect with his nose pointed into the western wind. Then, rumbling from the deeps of his throat, he spoke one dreadful word:

"Man!"

She sprang to his side. With her nose raised into the wind, La Sombra took the scent, and the thrill of horror rushed upon her. She sped up the slope, pressed through the narrow entrance of the cave and touched the soft, warm bodies with her nose, but so lightly there was not a stir. Then she hurried back to the mouth of the cave and crouched at her lookout.

The venturesome Black Wolf remained upon the shoulder of the mountain.

"Come back!" whined La Sombra. "You will be seen!"

"Peace, little fool," said the Black Wolf. "There is another scent in the wind. It means great trouble, for the blind devil has other eyes with him. Dogs, La Sombra!"

She stood boldly up and read the message in the air. Then she dropped down again.

"You were always half-blind in these matters of far scents," said she complacently. "There is only one dog."

"Only one?" The Black Wolf grinned. "Then I shall go speak to the fool before it comes too close. Perhaps I shall not have to hunt far today!"

It was dusk when the Black Wolf came to the mouth of the cave. La Sombra went instantly and sniffed the rabbit which he had dropped, then the feet of her husband.

"Your feet, your whole body smell of —Man!"

"He is making smoke and fire in the hollow," said he. "I lay as close as from here to the three pines on the edge of the hill and watched until the red flame got so big I felt fear in my belly. So I killed and ate, and killed again and brought to you."

"The dog?" said she.

"It is a white thing," said he, "so covered with Man stench that it has hardly an odor to call its own. It is a shameful, spiritless thing . . . Ah, the litle ones are awake and speaking."

"Let the little ones be," snarled La Sombra. "Be off, and keep watch!"

In the chill of the dawn the Black Wolf came again with another rabbit in his teeth.

"The dog has whelped and is surrounded by naked little white things like herself," he said. "The devil who owns the dog feeds her, and she licks his naked hand. How my gorge rose at the sight of it!"

"They will grow big," moaned La Sombra. "Then what will come of me and my children?"

"Do you fear that?" said the Black Wolf. "I tell you that if the devil will only turn his back, I shall lay them all dead!"

Molly Crosden, held in the trap, sat up to watch the struggle

TEN days of agony followed for La Sombra, and then Black Wolf found his opportunity. The trapper left his fire and placed on his shoulder the thing of iron which speaks and kills. But not until his steps had died away through the forest did the marauder slink to the edge of the camp. Where the sun broke through the trees and where there was warmth from the fire also, the bull terrier lay, her brood around her, gambolling on rickety legs.

The danger was almost upon her before she whirled and faced the dark monster. The slash of his teeth missed her throat and only opened her side as a sharp knife slides through naked meat.

She twisted, bleeding, to her feet, bared her teeth and met the second charge. As he struck her, her grip was on a foreleg. Writhing in the painful vise of her jaws, the Black Wolf swept her about the clearing. She was whirled against a tree with a thump that took half the life from all of her except those locked jaws. Then, in the sheer ecstasy of pain and fear, he snapped at a puppy striving to scamper out of the way and the soft young life went out between his teeth.

Her grip relaxed and he leaped away, limping, and saw her stagger to the small dead thing and lick its body. Then the Black Wolf charged again, and this time he found the throat.

II

LA SOMBRA lay on the ledge above, watching her mate. She did not see the tottering puppy that struggled up the crusted snow of the mountainside to the cave and pass inside. He reached a huddle of softly-furred bodies. Among these he snuggled, quivering and shaking with dread, then closed his eyes and slept.

Faster and thicker fell the snow and drew a soft, early twilight upon the day. The Black Wolf limped back to his home, his mate at his side licking his double wound. They came to the cave just as a great Man's voice began to thunder and rage in the hollow.

"But," said the Black Wolf, "what can follow a trail through the new snow? Least of all Man, for the devil has no nose! Well, they are all dead—but it is a day's work I shall never forget!"

"All dead?" cried La Sombra. "All? One has come into our home! The trail is as rank as the smell of a new kill!"

With a moan, she sped to her litter. But the stranger was so buried in the litter that their rank body-smells had overcome any odor of its own. Thrice she tumbled the little creatures over and over, then she searched every nook and angle of the cave, but the trail of the dog was gone.

"If it came," said she, "it is gone again. All is well!"

The terrier was asleep.

For another fortnight the white puppy slept more than it waked, and never walked except in the deep blackness of the cave. But then the litter was routed out by Mother Wolf until they scampered gravely forth to stare quivering and blinking in the May sun.

A thousand odors rushed upon their nostrils, things which in the cave they had sensed only dimly. Now the naked beauty of the world flashed before their eyes.

But La Sombra, after the first instant, paid no heed to the rollings and the tumblings of her litter. She sent up a sharp call, and the Black Wolf bounded up to the cave.

"Look!" said La Sombra. "We, my dear, have brought into the world a white wolf!"

The Black Wolf arched his neck. "Wolf?" said he. "La Sombra, this is a dog, like those I killed in the hollow!"

"You talk like a Man and a fool," said La Sombra. "Do you think that a mother could be deceived in one of her own children? While all the others cower and quake at your voice, see how bravely the little thing stands up before you and . . . Back! Stand back!"

This was a harsh warning to the Black Wolf, for as the terrier started on wobbly legs toward the great shadowy creature, a glint of green battle light appeared in the eyes of the monster. But he shrank from the snarl of La Sombra, and the little white dog began to bark a furious challenge.

"Is that the voice of one of our kind?"

growled the Black Wolf. "And look at its little eyes and—see the pink nose of the creature, like the nose of the pig I killed last summer."

"Everything is different while it is young," said La Sombra, growing angry. "Give the white wolf time to grow and he will be a cub I shall be proud of. And see how bravely it plays with the largest of my other sons!"

"The largest of your other sons is about to eat it!" The Black Wolf grinned as the cub laid hold on the puppy's throat.

"Ah, ah,'" murmured the mother. "It must learn by experience. And—look! The little thing has turned the tables already!"

For the terrier, having endured the sharply scratching teeth of its foster brother, had wriggled loose and laid hold upon the broad ear of the enemy. There it clung, while the big cub ran here and there, dragging the white leech with it, and whining for help. The Black Wolf stood up with a snarl.

"It puts a tickle in the muscles of my jaws to see that, La Sombra!" he said.

"Peace!" snapped the mother, so sharply that the puppy relaxed its grip and tumbled head over heels in the pine needles. "Do not come an inch farther forward! You would like to make a mouthful of my white son. Come, little scoundrel!"

SHE scooped the puppy to her with a lightning paw and lay with her head resting lightly upon it. Instinct made the terrier lie still.

"In these matters," said the Black Wolf, "your word is law. But as for hunting for you and your brood so long as this detestable little creature is one of your—"

"Do as you choose," snapped La Sombra. "But I tell you that this tender little son of mine with such a brave heart is dearer to me than all the rest."

The Black Wolf wheeled and stalked away, and from that day not a morsel did he contribute to the welfare of that family! Neither was he seen for weeks at a time, except as a looming outline on some sunset hill, or a drifting shadow through the underbrush. . . .

In the center of his camp, Tucker Crosden leaned upon his great staff and stared at the dead. He studied them gravely.

"Wolves," he said, "are connoisseurs in dogs, all right. They pick the good from the bad. Here's all of 'em lying dead, but the best of the lot was eaten. This here wolf, he says, 'The rest is good enough for killing, and this one, it's good enough for eating.' And so it was swallered!"

He began to laugh. He had done his raving, his cursing and his storming. Now this laughter of his was close to madness. He saddled the burro, and started for home.

Crosden Farm lay on a bit of land where the trees grew small, and where crops were never good. It had been a sizable place when he had settled here as a young man, but mortgages had eaten it away until now he could call his own only the little shack and the sheds around it, a bit of pasturage for the horse and a few cows.

The kitchen window was lighted when he reached the farm, and as the long, yellow ray came through the night, Tucker Crosden asked himself why he had come back. The death of Nelly and her puppies had not made any difference to his original plan to trap and make money for his family. What would Caroline say when she saw him coming back with never a pelt?

He turned toward the mountains again, but it seemed that all of his hopes rose up like ghosts before him. It was worse than facing death, for it was death in life to big Crosden. So after removing the heavy pack from the burro and letting the little animal into the pasture, he lurched on toward the house.

At the misted kitchen window he paused, but he could not see into the interior. He could only make out the voices of his wife and Aunt Abbey. And when he heard Aunt Abbey he scowled.

"Now go to bed, Caroline."

"It ain't eleven, yet. When Tucker's out, I mostly sit up for him till eleven. It sort of peeves him to come back and not find somebody setting up to pour his coffee out for him."

"Well, Tucker ain't here—thanks be!"

"Oh, don't be sayin' that, Aunt Abbey!"

"Are you still scared of him, and him away off in the mountains?"

Crosden waited to hear his wife deny it. But the denial did not come. Then he heard Aunt Abbey say in her acid voice:

"You have et yourself away, fearin' and hating that man."

"Not hate, Aunt Abbey!"

"Ain't I seen you set watchin' him, like you expected him to hit you the next moment?"

Tucker Crosden strode to the door and kicked it open. Aunt Abbey turned white. Caroline shrank in her chair.

"You're glad to see me, ain't you?" sneered Crosden. He dropped the pack, and it crashed heavily upon the floor.

"Tucker!" gasped his wife. "You'll be waking her!"

"What of it?" said Crosden. "Ain't she got a right to wake up and come to see her own father?"

MOLLY ran in. She went to him with a happy cry and Crosden gathered up his daughter with the sweep of one thick arm. He looked at her brown feet, knotted and deformed from going bare footed so much of the time, and he looked at the spindling brown shanks of her legs beneath the nightgown, and then to her skinny throat, and the thin face above, like the face of Caroline. Ten years old now, she was not beautiful, but she touched something in the heart of Tucker Crosden, and she always had.

"Now, look at you with your feet dirty," he said. "You might of stopped to put on your slippers."

She reached up and rubbed the frown from his brows.

"Would you smile, maybe?" she asked.

The smile broke through. "Your hand is dirty, too," said he. "Is that blood?"

"Hush!" she whispered. "Mother'll hear!"

He carried her back to her bed.

"Now tell me!" said he.

"It's Sammy Maxwell's blood. I punched him good. He give a howl and run off up the road."

"How old is Sammy?"

"He's past eleven."

"Ah, Molly, wouldn't you of made a grand boy?"

"Wouldn't I, though? Oh, why can't I be a boy?"

He sat beside her and began to stroke her head, feeling the hair blindly in the dark. Then suddenly he stood up.

"So long, kid," he said.

"So long, Daddy."

He stopped at the door.

"Look here, Molly, what these here women might be saying, it ain't always the gospel, you know!"

"Don't I know it?" said Molly, then added quickly: "I ain't asked about Nelly."

"Why not, honey?" he managed to say huskily.

"Because I'm saving the good news for the morning!"

He went back into the kitchen. "You been letting my girl run around here like an Indian," he said, scowling at Caroline.

Caroline parted her lips to speak, but fear stopped her.

"Who started her going wild?" Aunt Abbey put in sharply. "Who taught her to box instead of letting her learn how to sew? Who started her to riding and swimming instead of cooking and sweeping?"

"I'm sorry I done it," said Tucker Crosden. "Maybe it is my fault. Now she runs all around the neighborhood getting calluses on her knuckles from knocking down the boys! She's a trial to me, she is. She pretty near breaks my heart grievin' over her bad manners!"

He tilted back his head and broke into a roar of laughter that made the room quiver. Then Caroline, seeing that his humor was better, gained enough assurance to come up to him.

"Might it be that you've had a mite of luck, Tucker?" she said.

"Would you think that?" he asked.

"I pretty near know it!" said she. "Nothin' else would bring you back so quick, except—except you had found—I dunno . . . maybe a couple of silver fox, Tucker?"

He grinned at her lighted face.

"Or maybe," she admitted sadly, "it was only because one of the puppies looked almighty fine, and you wanted to bring it back where it would have a better chance. Was it only that, dear?"

"All them are dead," said Crosden.

Caroline closed her eyes.

"The puppies?" Aunt Abbey snapped. "Up there in that cold mountain air, no wonder. Well, I never cared about the narrow-eyed things, myself, and I never cared to pretend I did. Particularly, when I seen them ruining lives!"

And she sent a meaningful glance toward Mr. Crosden. This was the sorest point in the soul of the giant. When he had married Caroline she had been a pretty girl, and now she was only a weary woman, with haunted eyes, who started in alarm as she felt his glance upon her.

"Don't say it—don't talk about such things, Abbey!" she murmured.

"He ain't gonna beat you, Carrie, you little fool," said Aunt Abbey. "The man is a Crosden, after all. Only, what I do wonder, Tucker, is that you won't sell that dog. If she'll bring in three thousand—it's a heap of money!—why won't you sell her and set up your family like decent folks?"

"Ain't they decent?" asked Tucker, and smiled in restrained madness of wrath. "You got to excuse me, Aunt Abbey. Or maybe I better say that you had ought to excuse Nelly. You see, she up and died on me, and the market on dead dogs, it ain't the same as the market on live ones."

"Dead!" gasped Caroline. "Oh, Tucker! Three thousand dollars worse than wasted!"

HE RAISED his giant fists above his head, and they struck against the ceiling with a crash.

"Ain't there nothing in it but money that's lost?" he cried, and his voice was like the blast of ten bugles. "Look here, Caroline, don't you see what else there is? There's blood! There's my blood and hers. And there's all of them years that I've been working and hoping and praying, and now you say—three thousand dollars. But I tell you, not three million would make the difference, you hard-hearted . . . Look up here to me!"

He caught her arm. She looked up, but with a face white with dread. Her

La Sombra freed herself, one pitifully stumped foreleg high in the air

voice pierced his ears.

"Don't kill me, Tucker! Oh, lemme live! I don't mean no harm. I wish that Nelly was back—I wish—"

He threw her arm away from him. The weight of that gesture flung her whole body with it, and she crashed against the wall. There she sank upon her knees with a dreadful, soul-tearing scream. Tucker Crosden beat his hands against his face. The devil, it seemed, was conspiring to make it appear that he had struck his wife, had struck a woman—he! And so, with a stifled yell, he rushed from the kitchen into the black of the night.

Caroline could not move. Terror paralyzed in her all but the power to whisper:

"He's gone out to the shed for a gun. He'll come back to—to murder both of us! Lock the door!"

"A pile of good locks would do," Aunt Abbey snorted. "He would kick in that wall like it was the side of a matchbox. We got to do something else." She ran to the telephone, cranked frantically. "Hello, Central. This is Abbey Crosden. Tucker has gone mad. I've just seen him beating his wife. He's gone out to get a rifle and come back to murder us!"

The scream of Central seemed an annoying interruption to Aunt Abbey.

"Central, will you listen? As fast as you can, ring up the Morelands and the Burtons and the Charlie Heeney place. They're the closest. Tell them to send over quick all the men that they've got. Tell them not to wait to saddle, to come bare-backed. You can get them here in five minutes, and nothing *but* you can do it. Good-by!"

"It's a lie!" cried a piping voice behind her, and she whirled about and saw Molly in the doorway. "My daddy, he wouldn't hurt a *flea*. I—I hate you, Aunt Abbey, and I'm gonna find him. I'll go out and get him and bring him back here—by the hand!"

III

MOLLY darted out into the night. She went to the kennels, but her father was not there. She went to the bridge arching the little creek, a place of which he was fond. He was not there either, and she sat down and wondered where he might be.

She could not guess that he had run straight across the fields until some of the fury was dissipated in his brain, and then turned slowly back. He had not gone half the distance to the house when he heard three horses gallop at full speed down the road. Before he reached the fence, four more came with a rush and turned in to his house.

He went to the rear door, amazed at the sound of excited voices inside the house. And in front of the kitchen door he found two men. They leaped back when he loomed before them, and he heard the voice of Sam Watchet, crying:

"You keep off from me, Tucker Crosden! You've raised enough hell for one night! I got a gun, Tucker, and I'm gonna use it if you come a step nearer."

"Sam," he answered, "you're crazy! What have I done?"

"Maybe wife-beating ain't nothing in your part of the country," said Sam Watchet, "but around here . . . Keep back, Tucker, or—"

But a wave of madness struck through the brain of Crosden as he heard. Lurching forward, he heard the explosion of the rifle, and there was a tug at the side of his coat. Then he reached the gun and plucked it from the smaller man as though it had been from the hands of a child. Sam Watchet sprang in and locked his arms around the giant's body. The other man, with a shout, swung his clubbed rifle for the head of Crosden.

The big man struck, and man and rifle pitched backward into the dark. He dropped his fist upon the back of Sam Watchet's neck, and that gallant fellow crumpled upon the ground.

Then Crosden tried the door. It was locked and bolted, so he smashed the rifle through it, and kicked open the wreck. Before him he saw men and the glitter of guns, so he flung the tangled wreckage of the door in their faces. The shriek of a woman stabbed through his brain, and then the men had slammed and locked the inner door behind them.

Crosden looked helplessly around. He could smash down the second door, but this would be no gain, except perhaps to bring one of the fools into the grip of

his hands—and that would be called murder. Also, it dawned upon him that they were not here uninvited. That woman's scream, and now hysterical laughter, told him that they had come by request to save his wife from his hands.

It cleft his very soul. Staring about, his eye fell on a picture of The King hanging on the wall. Mechanically, he stripped the frame from it, folded it with care, and placed it in his breast pocket. Then he went out through the yawning doorway, past the two men groaning on the ground, carrying the heavy pack which he had recently stripped from the burro.

In the pasture, he found the gray horse, strapped the pack upon it and rode off into the night. But he had gone only a little way when he heard the one voice for which he would pause. He waited until the small figure hurried to him through the dark.

"Oh, Daddy Tucker!" cried Molly. "It ain't true what they say—that Nelly is dead?"

"Why, I've forgot about her," said Crosden. "But there was one in the litter that looked like The King, only better. He was perfect. Well, Molly, *he's* dead, along with all the rest!"

"Poor Daddy Tucker!" Molly said. "Oh, poor Daddy!"

"Molly, God bless you! I'm gonna be gone till I can come back with enough to keep you like a lady, clean and fine. Will you believe that?"

She caught the flaps of his coat and tugged at them.

"Daddy Tucker, what would I be doing at home, with you away?"

"Look here, Molly, would you be fool enough to want to go trapping with me?"

"I got my heavy coat on. Couldn't I cook for you and mend for you? Couldn't I do anything better than sit at home and watch Mother cryin' and foldin' her hands?"

"What would become of her?"

"Nothin'. She'll go home with Aunt Abbey."

"It ain't right, Molly," he told her.

But presently he found that he had walked a long distance, leading the horse and with her hand clasped in his. She was fighting hard to keep up with him through the mud. . . .

MOTHER WOLF awoke early, for yesterday had seen hard hunting and short fare. She looked at her little ones, stretched in sleep. Instantly the short ears pricked and the bright eyes opened. Only the "white wolf" did not stir until she stood up and walked to the mouth of the cave. Lop-ear, first born and strongest of the litter, followed her, but she nipped him.

"There is a danger in this morning air," growled La Sombra. She lifted her head to scent it. "But if you are quiet, and stay hidden, no harm will come to you." Then she left the cave.

Lop-ear—the teeth of his strange white brother had marked him for life—watched his mother slink across the clearing, then he went back to his fellows. As for the white terrier, there followed a cold time for him as the wind slid icy fingers into the cave. His foster brothers, in downy fur, paid no heed to this, but it pierced the terrier like a sword.

And at last, he forgot the warning of La Sombra. He crept to the mouth of the cave and lay there in the warmth of the morning sun. Lop-ear stole also to the front of the cave. He was followed by a frolicsome sister, and in another moment the lot of them were gamboling in the joyous heat.

White Wolf did not join the play. For by mutual assent he was ruled from the society of his companions as unwelcome. So he lay watching them until a scream of mortal fear made the wolf litter flatten against the ground. The scream came from a silver squirrel which had darted up a tree, followed by a creature that was ten pounds of silky deviltry. A rush and a rustling high up the pine, a scream, and those awe-stricken cubs knew that murder had been done.

Lop-ear began to steal back toward the cave, the rest following.

The little brown devil in the pine tree had not killed the squirrel because of hunger. Already the softly furred body had fallen from its bloody jaws as the fisher stared out through the branches at the scene beneath. He saw that the cave was close, and there might be

shelter there for all these small lives. So the pekan launched himself straight out into the air, in a wide-arching leap, and in an instant was among the cubs.

He did not use his jaws alone, but struck also to the right or to the left with forepaws garnished with five murderous daggers each. He ripped the very ribs from the cubs with the power of his strokes, and entered the cave with all the litter lying dead or dying behind him except Lop-ear and White Wolf. But now Providence stretched out a hand to save the two shivering little fugitives. A mellow, deep, and ominous note came faintly on the wind—the cry of a hunting wolf.

Like a guilty thing the fisher slipped past bleeding bodies into the covering shadow of the forest. . . .

That summer and the early autumn was a time of joy for the terrier. He grew big and strong and hard of muscle. Meanwhile, Lop-ear, reaching toward his full height, began to manifest a certain unruliness, a desire to travel according to his own lights. One October day, therefore, he broke into the lead ahead of Mother Wolf, and ran through the trees toward Pekan Lake, the fifth of the Seven Sisters.

"There is rabbit in the air!" said he. "I feel the kill coming in my bones."

As he leaped up to the top of a small rise of ground, he dropped flat upon the ground with a grunt of surprise and fear. But the terrier ranged vaguely ahead, studying the wind curiously until he, too, found the scent. He did not drop to the ground then, but stood up straighter to examine it.

"Down, down!" breathed Lop-ear. "It makes my belly cleave to my back and my mane bristle. I have never smelled such a hateful thing."

"It brings me nothing but happiness," said the terrier. "Ah, what is that?" For through the forest came a pounding, ringing noise.

LA SOMBRA spoke through bared teeth.

"Do you feel no fear? The thing you listen to now is the monster sharpening his claws." A crash shook the earth. "Listen, he has clawed down a tree. Do you fear him now? Aye, crawl back to my side and whine! There was no sense born into that foolish head of yours. Did not Lop-ear know? Did not I know, also, when I first took that scent, long, long ago?"

She led them back like the wind to the hills of the Dunkeld. There they lay in a little grove of young poplars.

"It is a thing of which I have never spoken," said Mother Wolf. "But I tell you now that my mother before me died by that same monster, caught by the teeth which he plants in the ground, and he stretched her skin before the entrance to his cave and dried it in the sun. Iron is the slave of this devil, whose name is Man. Where he carries iron, he carries death also. And he carries with him the voice that kills far off."

"Is he much larger than a grizzly?" said Lop-ear.

"He is no larger than your father, my son, and his run is nothing. But he has slaves, and there is a devil in him!"

"Have you seen him close?"

"There was a dreadful day when I was running a hot trail down the wind and I jumped out suddenly before a Man! He did not carry the voice which kills, or I should have been dead that instant, but he did have the tooth which fells trees."

"Mother," said the terrier, "you are looking from side to side as if you were afraid."

"Watch your own nose," she snapped, "and let my eyes alone! I had rather stand in reach of a mountain lion's claws than of the eyes of a Man!"

"Hark!" said White Wolf. "There is a stir in those bushes!"

They waited for a long time, and then they heard a far-off cry, the cry of Lop-ear. Mother Wolf rose instantly.

"That is the voice of a wolf who kills for himself only," she said to White Wolf. "Your brother will never come back. And it is time. How long, my son, before you go also?"

"Why should I leave you?" asked White Wolf.

"Because you need the world, and the world needs you, to teach you such things as even La Sombra does not know. And chiefly this, White Wolf—to kill alone, or to be killed!"

When White Wolf wakened the next morning he found La Sombra gone. Her absence gave him a thrill of instant dread. Could she have intentionally deserted him? As Lop-ear had gone yesterday without warning?

At the broad base of Spencer Mountain there was a little creek where the rabbits loved to troop. It was a favorite hunting place for Mother Wolf, and she might have stolen there this morning. But La Sombra was not there. White Wolf tried other haunts, but couldn't find her, though he ranged far and wide.

At evening, he found himself in a wood of silver spruce. Under the trees it was almost full night, and the terrier was saved from running into the open mouth of danger only by the happy chance that he saw it move against a background of the white waters of Lake Preston, now shining through the trees like burnished metal. It looked to the puppy at first as huge as the grim silhouette of a grizzly, but what actually sprang into the clearing before him was a great wolf, dark as the night itself.

The terrier flattened himself instantly upon the ground, and with his tail beating in conciliation, he whined:

"There is no harm in me. I have no wish except to remove my miserable self from your path if you will permit it!"

"Ah," snarled the beast, "are you not that sneaking white child of La Sombra? You are, for I take her scent from you as truly as coyotes make hard catching."

"I am going, if you please," breathed the terrier. "La Sombra will be in a rage and she will punish me."

"Stop!" growled the great wolf. "Do you think that I have wasted these many hours watching you and waiting for you, to let you go now? No, La Sombra shall never punish you again. I, the Black Wolf, shall leave nothing but a patch of blood for her to mourn over. And now, you rascal, will you stand up and fight for your life, or shall I take you by the nape of the neck and break your back?"

HE MADE a stiff-legged step or two toward the crouching puppy. White Wolf ran blindly for Lake Preston. Black Wolf, lunging from the forest to the open bank, saw his quarry cutting the water like a knife for a little island a stone's throw away. The big fellow was instantly in pursuit. He gained fast, but not fast enough.

As he neared the shore, he saw the puppy clamber out and stand trembling in the starlight. He lunged on through the water, driving with pads as bulky as the hands of a man. Close to the island, he reached for bottom, but found none, and if he pressed on, there was an enemy above him. For though even a rat would have known itself cornered on this little island, the terrier had no intention of dying without a struggle. There was nothing left but battle, and battle was what the puppy intended.

He danced up and down in a mixture of dread and ecstasy. And in the pale starlight his eyes turned green as he followed Black Wolf along the water's edge, snarling shrill and high.

Twice the wolf king of the San Jacinto Mountains lurched bravely for

[*Turn page*]

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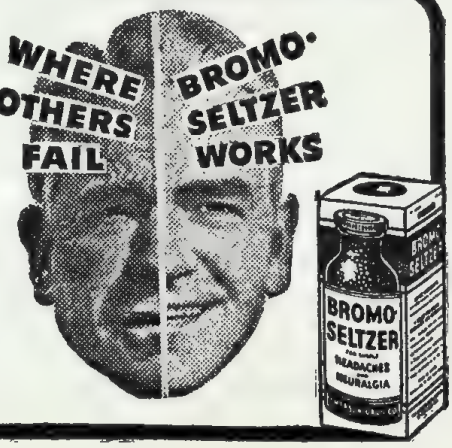

the shore, and twice he shrank from the staccato challenge of White Wolf. For, in spite of Black Wolf, he shared the nature of his kind, and the teeth of the white dog looked to him as keen as knives. So he circled the island, the puppy following along the bank and barking. At length Black Wolf turned back for the other shore and when he regained it sent a long, dreary howl quavering up toward the stars.

White Wolf chattered in his ridiculous soprano barking:

"You great black coward! Behold, I only wait for half my strength and then I shall hunt you, son of a coyote, as you have hunted me. You will wish for longer legs when you hear my voice. But do not doubt that you will die with my teeth on your throat."

The sting of his words brought a yell of rage from the dark-coated giant on the farther shore. But out of the distance that cry was answered by a long, smooth howl!

"La Sombra!" cried White Wolf.

"La Sombra!" echoed the giant gloomily.

"She is hunting fast!" said White Wolf. "She is hunting for me, and if she finds you here, I will take your hind legs and hold you down while she fumbles for your throat. It will be a pretty game. Wait for her, my father. I shall call to her to hurry."

He squatted on his haunches, lifted his nose high, and raised a wailing call. It brought quick response from La Sombra, and Black Wolf well knew that if he lingered here he was apt to have his former mate and her half-grown youngster at him tooth and nail.

"I shall see you again," he snarled harshly at the white dog, then he backed reluctantly into the shrubbery.

He was hardly gone before the terrier heard La Sombra breaking recklessly through the brush. She came with a bound to the edge of the water, gasping:

"Speak to me, little white son. Has the lake eaten you? Ah, here is the scent of Black Wolf on the shrubbery. Oh, murderer and traitor! Do you live, my child? Can you speak to me?"

He was so excited that he could barely whine: "I am here—I am unharmed. It was the Black Wolf himself! He has gone that way—through the trees!"

He dived into the water and swam toward her, and La Sombra waded belly deep to meet him, lapping the cold water greedily.

"So!" panted La Sombra. "You defended yourself on the island. You made the water into your friend. Good! By wits and wits alone we must prosper. You will live and grow great, my son. I, your mother, prophesy you will be great."

IV

IT SEEMED as though La Sombra now wished, by special tenderness, to make White Wolf forget she had left him, but desertion he knew that it had been, and he vowed that nothing should make him lose sight of her, now that he had regained her again.

"Have you eaten?" said La Sombra.

"I am hungry as a young bear," said he. So they hunted together. On the edge of the woods they came upon a fawn, and feasted riotously. They were too filled with meat to travel back to the cave in the Dunkeld Canyon, so they slept for a few hours in a thicket. When La Sombra stood up, silent as a shadow, and stole away, the youngster wakened suddenly and leaped out behind her.

"Lie down and sleep," said La Sombra. "I am only going across the meadow."

But he knew that she was lying.

"I could not sleep again for a day, at least," said White Wolf. "I shall walk along with you, since there is nothing better to do."

"Well," said La Sombra, "come if you will. But I am running fast tonight." And she was off instantly at a pace that made the lungs of White Wolf burn.

Between a grove of poplar and a wood of ash she paused and dropped her head toward the grass.

"Read the trail! What does your nose say, my son?"

He studied the grass with careful sniffings. "Blood has been here," said he at last, "and good red meat has passed this way on foot!"

"Is there nothing else?"

"There is nothing else."

"Follow me."

She led a little way farther, and turned over a broad leaf with a flick of her nose.

"What is here, my son?"

"There is a print on the soft ground, like the print of a little bear."

"It is not a bear. It is Man! And he has made the sign of the blood on the grass! Follow on!"

A little farther, they came close to Pekan Lake, where the ground was covered with soft, deep sand.

"Now," said La Sombra, "tell me what is here?"

The dog studied the trail, then studied the air.

"Ah!" said he, and started forward. "There is the meat of which I spoke."

The sharp snarl of La Sombra drove him back.

"There is the meat!" said she. "But where are the legs to carry it here? Now listen to me! This devil, Man, plants teeth in the ground, and they close on a careless foot and hold one in pain until Man comes with the voice that kills in the distance. And where he plants his teeth, he puts such meat as this to bring us closer, so that the teeth can leap on us!"

"Even the ground helps Man, then, to fight us?" said the dog.

"All things help him, if he wishes! Walk around the place with me, but carefully! If it were not for your sake, little white fool, nothing could tempt me so close. Study it from all sides. I tell you, I would not for a fat bull touch that meat, yonder."

Lightly, lightly he stepped around the strip of sand, staring at the bit of raw meat as though it were equipped with a dozen yawning mouths, well-armed with fangs. The wind, long asleep among the trees, came to life and whirled a great dead leaf behind La Sombra. Her tensed muscles reacted automatically. She leaped far to the side, and White Wolf heard a dull chopping sound, as when snapped teeth bite through flesh to the bone. There was a howl of anguish from La Sombra.

"Man!" she wailed. "His teeth have caught me! Help me! Help me, oh my son!"

He came to her, shuddering.

"Mother—Mother!" he whimpered. "Tell me what to do."

SHE was straining back against a chain, moaning as she struggled. Wise she was, but all her wisdom seemed to leave her now. She began to slash at the chain.

"Help me to bite through this thing that holds me!" said she. "Use your strong teeth!"

He lay down and gripped it tentatively, then shrank from the strange taste and the hardness.

"Ay," whined La Sombra. "It is iron. But still work for your mother in pity. Work for her, and if you free me—"

He worked, patiently, until his jaws ached, and the rusted chain was polished by his chewing, and his teeth were chipped. Then he stopped, and La Sombra stopped, also. She sprang up, the prisoned foreleg dragging.

"Listen!" said she. "What do you hear?"

"Only the wind walking through the trees far off."

"Ah, if that were all! No, there is another thing walking—Man, Man! And he is coming here. Save me, White Wolf!"

She fell into a frenzy, the chain clinking as she tore at it. But the trap held, and the cruel steel teeth worked deeper and deeper into the bone. Then White Wolf heard the reckless trampling through the brush as of some big animal hurrying toward them. La Sombra heard also, and the next instant her terrible white fangs were sunk in her own leg below the trap, where the pressure of the great spring had made her flesh almost insensible with numbness.

She leaped back again, and this time she leaped to freedom and turned to flee, but not with her familiar long and joyous gallop. There was no struggle now for the bull terrier to keep pace with her, for she hobbled upon three legs, holding one pitifully stumped foreleg high in the air.

The puppy turned terrified eyes behind him, for it seemed that a monster so cruel and so mighty, which planted teeth in the ground, and sank them home while far away, would also be granted speed like the falcon. But all

that he heard from behind was a hoarse shouting that died instantly upon the wind.

The puppy settled down to travel on at the side of his foster mother. In spite of her agony and weakness caused by her loss of blood, she resolutely put miles and a pair of creeks between her and the danger. But at last even her nerve of iron gave way, and she took covert in a thick brush. When he would have gone in with her, she turned on him with a dreadful snarl and a blow of her fangs that slit the tight skin over his shoulder muscles.

So he lay down, whimpering, in the outer edge of the brush, and spent the gloomiest night of his young life. But La Sombra slept, and stirring once in her sleep, hurt the stump of her mutilated leg and howled quick and short in agony. But though the terrier felt a tremor of sympathetic pain run through him, he knew she could not leave him now. She must depend upon him to hunt for her and for himself.

Man did not come near them while White Wolf taxed his wits morning and evening to kill for two, but when La Sombra's leg had healed, November snow was falling. There would be hard hunting even for four-footed wolves. And since Man was here in the valley of the Seven Sisters, La Sombra made a desperate resolve to go to another place where there were Men also, but where there was much game, easy to kill.

So they traveled for a fortnight by easy stages, while she gathered strength and learned to run on her three legs. They passed between Mount Lomas and Spencer Mountain, and one evening came out on a hill-shoulder above a broad and rolling plain. Little yellow rays of light shone at them and White Wolf crowded suddenly close to his foster mother's side.

"What are those eyes, Mother?"

"They are the tame fires of men which they burn in their caves. Now follow me. I am about to show you things that are new. When I was young and rash, I hunted this country and grew fat. Come!"

THEY descended to the lowlands and reached three strips of iron, each strip armed with spurs, but Mother Wolf jumped it, landing with a stagger on her single front leg. The white dog sprang beside her. In a corner of the field, there was a tangle of huddled gray forms. Mother Wolf dragged herself forward on her belly, whispering:

"When I growl, they will jump up. They are like little deer, without strength. Seize by the throat and tear. You will feel the life go out with the first rush of blood. Now, my son!"

She rose with a growl and three score small creatures bounded up before her with a pitiful clamor. One eager grip by White Wolf and, as the hot blood poured into his mouth, he felt the life of the feeble creature go out. They tore together at the warm body, while the sheep fled, bleating.

"Quickly!" said La Sombra, between mouthfuls. "Be quick. Ha, my son, they are already come!"

Three or four forms were darting across the field toward them, raising a great yelping noise.

"More wolves!" cried the terrier. "And yet they bark as I bark, and not like you and Lop-ear!"

"Not wolves, but dogs," said she. "They are the slaves of Men—noisy fools who speak ten times before they act. Take the dog which runs in front and I shall take the one next to him if they close. Remember, my son—your teeth for the throat!"

White Wolf darted forward as though launched from springs, his compacted weight striking the foremost sheepdog fairly on the breast. The dog struck back with his wolflike fangs, but he was dealing with a white streak which struck him a hammer blow, knocking him into the air and flat upon his back. A wolflike maneuver was this, but the terrier finished the battle after a fashion which La Sombra had never taught. He checked his rush, caught the fallen dog by the throat and locked his grip, worrying his teeth deeper and deeper, and closing his eyes in soul-satisfaction.

"It is done," said La Sombra, who had scattered the rest of the pack with a slash or two and a rasping snarl. "This dog is dead. Let him be!"

He stood up, licking his bloody lips.

"This is a pleasant game!" said White

Wolf. "Let us run after them and play it again."

"No." said La Sombra. "We have been too bold already. Let us go at once!"

So White Wolf trotted obediently at her side out of the field and back toward the hills. A fence rose before them. They leaped it and, in the starlight, great monsters heaved up from the ground.

"Mother!" cried White Wolf, dropping to his belly. "What are these creatures?"

They had gathered in a cricle, brandishing their armed heads and panting forth great clouds of steam on the frosty air.

"These are more slaves of Man and, therefore, they are fools," said the mother. "Come closer and I will show you a trick worth knowing!"

A young bull, starting impatiently from the circle, raced after them. La Sombra, even on three legs, was fast enough to keep ahead of the charging bull. Far off across the field he pursued them.

"Now!" cried La Sombra. "You to that side and I to this, quickly, my son —leap wide!"

As the bull thundered by, head down, White Wolf saw La Sombra leap in and slash at the tendon of the hind leg. She cut long and deep, but could not slash it through. Moreover, she staggered with the effort, fell headlong and lay still!

To White Wolf it seemed that she must be playing a game, but when she dragged herself up and sat stupidly blinking, he knew she had been stunned by the fall—and the bull was charging again.

WHITE WOLF flung himself straight in the path of the monster! The head of the bull went down and the polished horns drove level with the ground. Instinct laid a hand upon his back, as it were, and crushed White Wolf to the ground. The deadly horns drove over the dog's back, but he gripped the broad, tender nose of the monster.

Blind with pain and fear, the bull reared, but the wrenching weight of the terrier flung him just far enough to the side to spoil his balance, and the monster lurched down. Something flashed close—the teeth of La Sombra slashing the throat of the bull.

"He will bleed to death," she said, "then we will eat till our bellies are in pain." Then, as White Wolf obeyed, she said softly: "There is none other in the world of wolves like my son! Have I not seen Black Wolf kill? But my white son takes the giants by the head and throws them on the ground so that his mother may have food."

V

IT WAS a full year and a half since Adam Gannaway had been south of the Winnemagos, and now he was anxious to get to the lowlands before autumn was gone. Descending into the valley of the Seven Sisters, he came to the edge of the pine forest, looked down to the long river and the seven shining lakes.

Something passed between him and the view—a great gray wolf running with desperate bounds, and pursued by three animals built like greyhounds of enormous stature and huge beam. The lobo turned suddenly at bay, and Gannaway settled himself to watch a long battle. He had seen one wolf scatter half a dozen fighting dogs. But in half a second all the preconceptions of Adam Gannaway vanished. To the right and the left one of the big dogs feinted at the cornered wolf, and his teeth slashed the air. The next moment the long jaw of the third hound was clamped in the throat of the lobo and all three swarmed upon it. This killing was unlike anything Gannaway had ever seen before, or wished to see again. It seemed uncanny, unnatural.

A shout from the trees below, then two men hurried out with three more dogs, and had taken the dead wolf's scalp before they noticed the meteorologist. Gannaway came up to them.

"Strangers," he said, "I've seen dogs run wolves before, but I've never seen such a professional air about it. I can tell you—"

"You don't have to." The elder of the two grinned. "We know. Lefty, here, he come up in the center, with Pete on his right and Tiger on his left. Tige and Pete, they made a feint on each side,

and Lefty dived in and got a hold on the throat, and—"

"You trained them for that?" cut in Gannaway.

"Very particular."

Gannaway produced tobacco and the two men filled their pipes.

"They're mainly Irish wolfhound stock," the elder explained. "Except Grampus, yonder." He indicated a creature with the body of a clumsy greyhound, with one outcross. Only one."

"And what's that?" asked Gannaway.

"That's the secret. Ain't it, Tom?"

"Ay, Dan," agreed Tom Loftus.

"Where we was raised," said Dan Loftus, "lobos would pick off a lot of calves and colts every season and, when we hunted them, we drew a blank. 'Course the dogs could find them, but we noticed that most generally before the party was over it had cost a hundred dollars' worth of dogs to get ten dollars' worth of wolf. So we aimed to find a breed that could make a kill without getting themselves ripped to bits. We worked for a good many years, but finally we turned the trick, I guess."

Gannaway swallowed his distaste for these fellows in his curiosity.

"But, it seems that you've come a long distance from nowhere to run your wolves," he said.

"We're just nabbing what comes in our way," said Dan Loftus. "We're bound for where they have the White Wolf, and I guess that he's worth the trip at twenty-five hundred."

"Twenty-five hundred dollars bounty for a single wolf?" exclaimed Gannaway. "A white wolf, did you say?"

"*The* White Wolf," Dan Loftus answered. "Down on the lower Winnemago there's a three-legged wolf and a white wolf that's been raising so much hell for a year they get into the papers regular. They've killed enough sheep and cattle to stock a ranch, and they ain't never been caught. But when we come swarming down there, it's gonna be a different story. Eh. Tom?"

"You can lay to that!" said Tom Loftus solemnly.

"Hello!" said Gannaway suddenly. "What's that smoke, yonder? Someone else is camping in the valley of the Seven Sisters! Do you know who it is?"

"We got a sort of a suspicion," said Dan Loftus, shrugging. "A trapper. We knocked on his door about an hour back But we didn't stay."

"Why not?" asked Gannaway.

"You go and try for yourself," said Dan Loftus. "And when you see him, tell him that after we catch the White Wolf, we're gonna come right back this way, and we'll not be carrying just a rusty old Colt, but *rifles!*"

WHOEVER the trapper was who had dared to refuse hospitality to fellows such as these, backed by such a devilish troop of fighting beasts, Gannaway wanted to know at first hand, no matter what the risk. So he went toward the smoke column and presently reached a squat log cabin on the shore of Lake Pekan. He stepped to the door and rapped. No answer. He was about to rap again when the long, bright barrel of a rifle was slid out through a hole in the wall and exploded.

He jumped back with an oath. Then, deciding that the bullet had been sent simply as a warning, he said calmly:

"Stranger, my name is Gannaway. I'm what you might call a mountain tramp. All I want is a little bacon, if you can spare it. If not, any smoked meat will serve."

The door of the cabin slowly yawned open and, in the darkened doorway, stood an eleven-year-old girl with a freckled face and wide bright eyes.

"My dad," said the girl, "he wants to know if the smoked meat will rest you?"

"Of course," said Gannaway.

The door slowly closed again. Then after a pause, it was opened once more and a ten-pound package, bound in tough bark fibre, was thrown out at his feet.

"I reckon that's as much as you like to pack along with you," said the girl. "My dad, he ain't fond of strangers, particularly. So long."

Suddenly the truth dawned on Gannaway.

"My dear," said he, "your father is nowhere near the place. You're alone in that cabin and afraid."

"Afraid of you? I guess not! Nor of two like you."

"Then I'll come in."

"If you was to come in, and Dad was to find you here—"

"I'll take a chance."

"All right," she said, defiant. "Come along!" She pulled the door to its greatest width, and Gannaway stepped into the cabin. "Well, I've warned you," the girl went on, "and I sure do ache for a talk! It's been a whole year since I've seen anybody but Dad!"

"A year!" echoed Gannaway. "If you were to tell me what makes him keep—"

He had just lowered himself into a home-made rocking chair when the girl suddenly turned white with apprehension. But before she could speak, a shadow lunged from the doorway and a great hand seized on the back of Gannaway's neck.

"You damn rat!" said a thick voice. "Are you come here to pump the kid? I'll talk for myself!"

The meteorologist felt himself raised as by the arm of a steam derrick. Standing above him, clothed in deerskin, as was the child, and masked with a heavy beard, was his giant of the year before —Tucker Crosden. Recognition dawned in the face of the big man, also.

"Gannaway!" he boomed. "Damn my hide if it ain't Gannaway. Man, man, you come near to getting your neck twisted. Molly, come here and shake the hand of a white man."

Never, thought Gannaway, had the price of the makings of a Bull Durham cigarette reaped such a rich return.

There was no need to ask questions, for the big man talked freely enough when supper was ended and Molly was asleep in her bunk. Bits of what he said burned into the memory of Gannaway.

"When I seen the first puppy, I didn't care much about the rest that might be born. It looked like only one thing." He turned his head to a picture on the wall. "It looked like The King! Only stronger. More head on him, and more behind the head! And then one day I came back—to find Nelly dead, and the rest of the litter dead, too. But The King, he wasn't there. D'you see? The wolf killed the rest of 'em, but he *ate* The King.

"It left me sort of like I had been hit with a club. I started for home, but when I got there, there was nothing but trouble. My wife was scared of me. She sent for help, and the neighbors come and tried to keep me out of my own house. I knocked a couple of them out of my way, not using my full strength, I swear to that. Yet before we got to the foothills—the kid and me—the news come along that one of them two was dead! Since then, I've been waiting for them to come to get me. I keep out of sight of men.

THE giant leaned forward and laid a great hand on the scientist's shoulder.

"If The King could know what I've suffered from women, Gannaway, he'd come out of his grave, where I laid him all solemn and proper. What turned me out of my home? What put a murder onto my hands? The women, Gannaway! And the kid, yonder, when she grows up she'll be like the rest of them! She's got her mother's blood in her, and she'll do the same thing all over again!"

The blood grew cold about the heart of Gannaway, yet he ached with pity.

"But there's one thing I would like to ask you," the big man went on. "If The King was to know the way I've suffered for him, wouldn't he come back to me?" He gripped Gannaway's hands. "Because I've told you the whole story, and you know as well as I know that he *did* come back once!"

"He — came back — once?" echoed Gannaway faintly.

"Ay, of course! The minute I seen that first-born of Nelly's I knew it was The King himself that had come back to the earth and to me! It was his soul in the puppy the wolf killed!"

Gannaway drew a long, slow breath. He could not meet the mad eyes of Tucker Crosden.

"It was a wolf with a track like the hand of a man," the big man went on. "A hundred and thirty- or forty-pound wolf, with a chopped toe in a forefoot. I've seen the wolf since! A black giant. Oh, it ain't for nothing that I've come back to this here valley! It's because the black wolf is here, too! And if I was to kill him, Gannaway, mightn't it make it a lot easier for The King to come back to me a second time? I ask you, man to

man, might it not?"

"Yes, he'll probably try to come back again, some day," Gannaway said gravely. "And it might help a lot to get the black wolf out of the way!"

"God bless you, Gannaway!" Tucker Crosden cried, crossed the room with a single leap, and snatched the child into his arms. "Molly, Molly, wake up and listen! Gannaway's a scientist and he says there's a good chance The King is gonna come back to me!"

The wide, sad eyes of the child stared at Gannaway in perfect understanding. And he knew she had only feigned sleep.

Adam Gannaway knew that his conscience would never be clear if he left this girl in the power of this madman. Somehow he must manage to take her away.

* * * * *

From the hedge beside the back yard of a house, White Wolf saw a tangle of dogs. There were two or three mongrels, a big brute of the mastiff type, a greyhound and two foxhounds. White Wolf had spent every opportunity during the past year in testing the methods of various dogs and in perfecting his own style of warfare. Where dogs were concerned he felt beyond fear. And now he watched and waited for his chance.

The kitchen door opened, and a great bone was thrown to the snarling pack. They closed over it with a rush, and their sharp, barking voices raised a hubbub until the huge mastiff waded through the tangle. He gripped the bone, and with a growl scattered the rest. They stood at a distance, slavvering with hatred.

White Wolf looked more closely at the victor. He also looked at the bone, enriched with ample shreds of meat. Here were great odds. Here was the house of Man looming. And the central figure was one worthy of respect in hand to hand encounter. But here was also a prize worth fighting for and a battle for its own sake.

HE LAUNCHED himself like an eagle dropping from its crag. The flash of his body was in the eye of the startled mastiff and out again as the teeth of White Wolf gripped the end of the bone and tore it clear. He could have gone on freely with his prize, but he had no desire for food alone. Battle was what he wanted, and now it offered itself. The mastiff lurched to its feet and charged. White Wolf sidestepped like a boxer and laid the hip of the monster open with a single slash.

"Wolf!" gasped the mastiff, as he rushed into the full scent of the terrier.

He whirled like a mad thing and charged again. Once more he struck thinnest air; once more he received a punishing cut; then all discretion left him. His head rose as he flung wildly in again, and this was the moment for which the terrier had been waiting. He dived under and up like a swimming seal, and his long punishing jaw locked on the throat of the larger dog.

"Help!" gasped the mastiff, as he lay on his back, struggling futilely. "Wolf!"

"Wolf?" snarled one of the foxhounds, making use of this moment to seize on the neglected bone. "Wolf? No! A dog like the rest of us—and your master, you fat-sided murderer!"

"Wolf!" choked the mastiff. "I am dead unless you help. Wolf! Do you not smell him?"

His eyes bulged and his tongue lolled far out as the bull terrier shifted to a deeper grip and wriggled his teeth home. But a mongrel, dancing with excited yappings to the windward of the struggling pair, stopped short and threw its nose into the air.

"It is true!" he cried. "Wolf! Wolf!"

And instantly his teeth were in a hind leg of the terrier. The rest, with a chorus of startled cries, flung themselves in a heap upon White Wolf.

He had already turned from the exhausted mastiff. His first stroke tore the mongrel from eye to ear and made it loose its grip with a howl. His second split the ear and the jowl of a foxhound. And he rose like a white but evil spirit out of the tumbling heap just as the back door of the house opened and a woman appeared.

"Jerry—Mack, stop your noise, you fools," she ordered, then stopped as if stunned. "Dad!" she screamed. "The White Wolf! He's killed Champ, and he's laid out two more, and . . . Sic him,

boys! After him, Jerry! Hey, Mack, take him! Oh, you fools! You cowards!"

For the injured dogs lay whining, licking their hurts. Meanwhile, Sid Harter, owner of the house and of the dogs, did not pause to pick up a rifle. When he heard "White Wolf" a sudden, golden vision of twenty-five hundred dollars crossed his mind's eye, and he reached the back door in a bound, revolver in hand.

But already the terrier had scooped up the beef bone and fled through the hedge. It was too late for even a chance shot, and all that Sid Harter saw was all that most others had seen of the famous destroyer—a single streak in the dusk of the day.

"If I'd been here to see!" he groaned. "But it's too late. We can't run him with a beaten pack! Get to the telephone, Mary, and ring up Chick Parker's house. The Loftus brothers are over there with their dogs. Here's their chance to pick up a red-hot scent. Then we'll see what comes of them and their hounds!"

VI

WHITE WOLF and his foster mother hunted further west toward the desert, although La Sombra had no liking for it. Now that she was lamed, its great open spaces were dangerous for her, so she and White Wolf stayed close to its verge, studying the scents that greeted them.

"There are cattle on that hill, my son."

"I am not in the mood for killing a bull."

"There are pigs, too, close to that barn which gives out the sweet scent of the hay."

"Ah, that is better!"

At the pigsty La Sombra paused.

"What is that?" said she.

He listened, and made out now the baying of a dog.

"It is a hound," said he.

"And after what?"

"That same raccoon you scented before we left the river, perhaps."

[*Turn page*]

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"No dog ever cried in such a voice for a raccoon. There is a larger game than that. Listen again, oh my son! It is coming in this direction."

"Let us eat, Mother. Do you fear a dog?"

"When a dog hunts at this hour there is apt to be a man with it. Let us wait. It is not easy to run on a filled belly. Besides, dogs give tongue in just that key when they run on the trail of a wolf!"

The terrier pricked his ears and listened. "It is true!" he admitted. "They are running the trail of a wolf."

"And we are far from the river. We must start back. First we will run through that pig pen. There is enough odor there to kill our scent."

They leaped in and out of the pen before the startled porkers had time to open their drowsy eyes.

"How easy it would have been!" sighed White Wolf as they loped on. "That white boar slept on his side with his throat held out for your teeth, Mother!"

"An empty stomach makes a light foot and a sharp tooth, my son. And it is better to live hungry than to die fat. Let us cross this creek, and have a look at our own trail which we made coming down. How fast that hound is coming! And horses, which mean Men also."

They took cover in a clump of shrubbery from which they had a clear view of an open space across which they had traveled on their way toward the desert. And they had hardly settled down before the bay of the hunting dog broke on their ears and it leaped into the clearing—a gaunt creature with the body of a greyhound and the grotesque head of a foxhound. It ran swiftly, nosing the ground only now and again. Behind it ran five other great dogs, bigger than wolves, with long, sinister heads. Almost at once they were gone among the farther trees, as two horsemen swept into view and out again.

La Sombra stood up and stepped forth into the twilight with a shudder.

"It is well that we are not heavy with food?"

"It is well, Mother," White Wolf agreed.

They headed not straight for the river above their den on the rock, but winding through the farmyards in a circuitous route. For in every farmyard their scent would be covered for a moment, at least. And in between these pausing places, La Sombra ran as hard as her three legs could carry her.

The voice of the hound died out with the sound of the wind. But presently it came again. The six dogs had reached the furthermost point in the trail and now they were turning back and traveling with uncanny speed. And La Sombra was already far spent. They were not halfway to the edge of the woods bordering the river when they heard the yelling of the hound break into the open.

"They are coming fast," La Sombra gasped. "Be true to me now and do not leave me!"

"I shall never leave you, Mother!" her foster son panted. "Run hard! Run true!"

That seemed to give her greater confidence, and confidence is strength. They reached the woods, and she took the straightest course for the water, sinking lower on her staggering legs.

"I can go no farther," she breathed. "Let us make our last stand and die together."

"On and on!" cried White Wolf. "The river is near. Is not that the gleaming of the water just ahead?"

BUT now behind them arose savage yells from all six of the monsters. They had sighted their quarry. White Wolf, glancing back, saw the five dark ones pass the hound and leap into the lead.

"Go on!" gasped White Wolf. "Go on, Mother! I shall give them one check, and you find the water!"

No long-legged wolf or hound could have managed the maneuver which followed. White Wolf hurled himself about and flattened himself to the ground. He saw a great gaping of long teeth above him, but he had crouched too low for the teeth to flesh themselves home in his body. They merely skimmed his back while the grip of the terrier fastened like a hand of iron on a foreleg of the leader of the pack.

Living flesh and sinew could not stand the sudden, jerking strain. As

the wolf-hound pitched into the air and heavily down again upon his back, the strong bone of his foreleg broke fairly across.

So fell Tiger, the fleetest of the pack. White Wolf, dashed to the ground by the somersault of Tiger, had half his wits knocked from him, but instinct told him to fight close to the ground. He rose under the long legs of big Sneaker and gave him a wolfish slash across the belly. It twisted Sneaker into a knot as the other four rushed at White Wolf. But it was like charging a fluttering moth. He was in and out and away before a single tooth was fleshed in him, and he heard the convulsive splash of La Sombra as she flung her exhausted body into the river.

He, himself, could never reach the water in a single burst, and he knew it. But there was a high pile of rocks near the bank and for it he made, leaping to the side and then to the top. There was no permanent security, of course, but here he had a chance to meet them one by one, more or less. So when Doc sprang at him, he gave that veteran a punishing cut across the face that blinded one eye. The hound, Grampus, took a cut across ear and neck that toppled him to the ground with a yell.

The heart of White Wolf rose high. It seemed that he had made good—and then two riders broke through the trees.

"There's Tiger down—a broken leg!" one shouted. "Where are the two devils?"

"I see only one," called back the other. "I think—ay, yonder on that rock, just a white glimmer. The White Wolf, Tom! Take him, boys! Pete, Lefty, Sneaker, Doc, Grampus—take him, boys, all together! Tom, your rifle before the white fiend gets away! The twenty-five hundred is ours."

It seemed to White Wolf that the sound of the man's voice transformed the dogs. They clambered up the steep face of the rock and charged him with a mad carelessness. Tiger was done; Sneaker had rushed the rock for the last time. But here were four raging devils, without fear of death, it seemed! They came from behind. He drove them back with a snarl and a flash of teeth, then turned to face front again only to receive the long, gripping jaw of Lefty in his throat.

There was power in that grip a wolf might have envied, and the terrier knew the meaning of the hold all too well. It was for that same purchase that he himself maneuvered in all his battles, and now writhings and strainings would be all in vain to break that hold. There was only one thing left. Another pair of jaws slashed at his flank and missed a deadly hold by a fraction of an inch. In one moment all four would have their teeth fleshed in him.

White Wolf dived from the rock toward the stones thirty feet below. He saw the blur of stars above him as he whirled underneath. He saw the stars go out and the black faces of the stones as he whirled to the top again, and then they struck the rocks. There was force enough to knock the wind from the body of White Wolf and send him rolling helplessly over and over, down the slope toward the swift current of the Winnemago, as the teeth of Lefty relaxed their grip.

THEY would never close on an enemy's throat again, for the full weight of the two heavily falling bodies had struck on the ridge of Lefty's back and shattered the vertebrae like brittle chalk. He died that instant, and Pete, Doc, and Grampus lurching down the slope to the water's edge saw the white dog seized by the current and jerked down the stream as though by a strong hand.

"Three dogs lost!" screamed Dan Loftus. "Call back the rest before them damned wolves murder 'em in the water. Gimme your rifle! Who'd of thought this could happen? Shoot, Tom! My nerve's all gone!"

"I can't see nothing!" groaned Tom, rifle in hand at the edge of the water. "Dan, we've lost this trick. Help me look to the dogs! What a night! One wolf going through our pack like a knife through butter—and not a big one, at that. Just a runt of a white wolf, but with all the devils in hell turned loose inside of him!"

White Wolf, though weak from loss of blood, managed to reach the landing place on the rock. But he would never

have had the power to clamber to the safety of the cave had not his foster mother waited for him there and, standing knee deep in the current, laid her grip on the nape of his neck and helped him in.

FOR three days she tended his wounds, but on the fourth day they were gone. For, on that day, they saw a boat drift down the stream, slowly, touching at every one of the little islands above them, while the men on board went ashore in each place and searched eagerly. No doubt as to what they were searching for, and no doubt but that the point of rocks would not escape this pair of systematic hunters. So, when the dusk descended, White Wolf and La Sombra swam to the shore.

They headed straight up the stream, keeping to the rocks along the shore where the splash of the spray would wash out the scent and the sign of their tracks before they were half an hour old. They kept to this slippery path for four or five miles, then headed for the upper mountains. They traveled slowly, but always in the direction of the familiar old valley of the Seven Sisters, each at the same time aware that they were approaching danger such as that from which they fled more than a year before.

But, of the particular species of danger which existed that winter over the entire mountains, White Wolf had no conception until they turned the corner of a boulder, on a day when a terrible cross-gale was cutting straight across their path, so that no scents blew either up or down. They came literally nose to nose with a mangy red fox hurrying west. It bounded back and stood lightly poised, ready to fly but, like any fox, unwilling to waste unnecessary effort.

"Shall I take this little brute by the throat and let him roll down the side of the canyon?" asked White Wolf.

"The creature is unclean," said La Sombra. "I would not put a tooth in that hide unless I were starving. What now, little red rat? Where do you travel and what has dug the hollows in your sides?"

"I have come from what you are going to." The fox grinned. "I shall not tell you to turn back, because all wolves are headstrong fools. But when you cross the mountains, you will feel the pinch in your bellies, for the very mice are dying for the lack of seeds to feed on. *Adios*, my friends. As for you, White Wolf, I have heard of you even here in the mountains. But I give you this warning— when you come among others who are true wolves, they will see that you are really a dog, and they will dine upon you. Farewell!"

He bounded to a higher rock, and scampered lightly down the trail.

They were not long in finding that what the sick fox said was true. They made their home in the old cave at the head of the Dunkeld Canyon, but at the end of three days they had had, between them, a single half-starved old rabbit, too weak to get away from them, and the White Wolf began to show the tokens of ill-fare. For he needed to have food and plenty of it if he was to live and work. So they left the old cave at the end of the third day, and dipped into the valley of the Tomahawk River. Here, almost the first thing they encountered, was a mother elk and her half-grown son. White Wolf would have attacked at once, but the wary La Sombra held him back.

"These are not man-handled, pastured cattle," said she. "Do not think, my son, that in the midst of a fight they grow foolishly blind, but even as we do, their eyes are opened most when danger is the nearest! It would need more than two wolves to pull down one of them. If we attack the calf, we have the mother on us, and one blow of her foot will shatter your ribs. However, we may follow them and see what opening they will give us. If it is a young and foolish mother, perhaps—"

So for two more days they followed the trail of the elk, which was marching vigorously, making for a well-known elk yarding ground on the upper Tomahawk River. But during day and night the vigilance of the mother did not relax, and it would have gone hard with La Sombra and her foster child in that dreary march, had they not found a frozen rabbit in the snow, and on the next day, two partridges.

On the morning of the third day there was a change. La Sombra heard first and touched her companion. When he raised his head he, too, could make out a deep-throated, melancholy chorus coming over the edge of the northern hills.

"What devils are those?" asked White Wolf, shrinking.

"Wolves, my son—like me and like you! And they are running on this same trail. Ah, we shall have full bellies before night if the leader of that pack knows how to make a kill! Now stop the elk, my son! Let us show the pack that we are willing to do our share of the work. Ay—ay! Play at the heels of the elk, my son, but not too close. Play for the calf rather than the cow, and that will keep them both standing! I shall attend to the heads of them!"

With little rushes the big cow strove to drive La Sombra away, and had the ground been firm she might have caught the crippled wolf, but over this soft snow La Sombra could evade with ease. The calf backed its rump against that of its mother and made what head it could —but here was the terrier barking. So the cow and the calf began to mill in a small circle, keeping their heads to the two foes as well as they could.

The baying down the trail was louder now, and the poor mother knew well enough what it portended. She gave a trumpet call to her calf, and breaking from the two assailants, headed off up the valley at a round pace. But only for a moment. A snap of La Sombra close to the hamstring of the calf made the mother elk turn in dismay and charge in vain. And, before she had finished that charge, the pack was in sight, swinging over the northern hills with a burst of ominous music such as the White Wolf had never heard before.

He saw a round dozen of thin-sided wolves come at full gallop down the slope with a brown monster running well in the lead. The brown monster came fast, but when he saw that the quarry was already at bay, he slackened his gait.

"Well done, La Sombra!" he called in a deep voice. "You have held them well, you and the other. Now stand back and let the men work at this business."

"It is as you please, El Trueno," said La Sombra, and shrank away with White Wolf following her. "Courage, my son," she murmured at his ear. "These are our own people, White Wolf. Mark the leader, my child. He is called El Trueno, because he has a voice like thunder. And yonder gray wolf with a white streak across his breast is called Marco Blanco. I have seen him hamstring a moose at a single slash. There are other wolves here whom I know, and never have they been more welcome to my eye than now. They are thin, and when such a pack as this is thin, it is ample sign that single wolves must starve! Ha! There is a fool, a young one, and of all fools they are the worst!"

NOW the pack had scattered in a swift circle around the pair of elk and, sitting down on their haunches in the snow, they took breath and examined the work before them in greater detail. But, as La Sombra had seen, there was one young brave in the group whose courage was greater than his discretion.

"It is my kill!" he cried. "The kill is mine!"

Suddenly he darted at the heels of the cow, and leaped long and straight with fangs bare to try for the hamstring. It seemed to the bull terrier a well-made leap. Then the cow elk turned ever so little and struck out with a single hind foot, into the midst of the youngster's ribs. The young wolf was dead before he struck the ground, and all his companions swarmed upon him. White Wolf, with disgust, saw the body torn to bits and devoured with incredible speed.

"Ah," he groaned, "are there not devils in these wolves?"

There was no answer from La Sombra. She was securing her portion with the rest!

VII

THE COW elk and her calf had made off the instant their foes were drawn away by this diversion. But it was hardly two minutes before only clean-picked bones remained of the fallen lobo, then the pack swept away with a brain-racking yell and quickly

had the cow and her calf at bay again.

Once more the circle formed, but now the taste of flesh had emboldened them all and the impatient yelling began at once:

"Is our leader El Trueno? Let him kill, then, for here is meat and our stomachs are not yet filled."

El Trueno was not one to let such a call go unheeded.

"Some two or three of you play at her heels," he said shortly. "El Trueno will cut her throat if you do your part!"

Five of them were instantly feinting at the hind legs of the big cow, and as she wheeled toward them, El Trueno sprang in and up. Another leap was as true and as swift as a stone flung from a sling, but the cow was no sluggard. She stopped her whirling movement, jerked up a foreleg, and El Trueno was sent spinning over and over. He landed cat-like on all feet, blinking and coughing.

The starved pack showed their glistening fangs and boomed in gloomy chorus:

"El Trueno has missed the kill. Who next? Are we children or grown wolves?"

It seemed to White Wolf that these cunning slayers erred in one vital thing. They played at the heels, the flank, and the throat. His own instinct was to play for the head. It was the farthest from the elk's active hoofs. As for speed to get her, he had seen them at their best, but he had seen no actual lightning play of foot and tooth such as he felt himself capable of.

"Wolves of El Trueno," he said, "I have seen you work bravely and well. But for you and for La Sombra and for my sake also, I shall try at this game. Speak to the cow from the heels again. Take her eye, and let me try for her head!"

They abated their yelping for an instant.

"Is it a wolf-dog, or a dog-wolf?" sneered El Trueno. "Will your cub strike home where El Trueno has failed, La Sombra? But let the young fool taste the sharpness of her heels if he will. Play with her again, brothers. Yet I think that this is a braggert and a coward. Does he not tremble as he speaks?"

For with the cold, and above all with excitement, White Wolf was trembling in every fibre of his body. There was a flurry at the heels of the tormented cow again, and again as she swung about, danger flew at her. But not at flank or throat or leg. It darted straight for her head, and the teeth of the terrier sank home in the tenderly nerved flesh of her broad nose. Then the eighty pounds of his weight jerked whip-lash fashion at her head and neck, with such a leverage that she was flung a staggering step sideward.

She was unbalanced for a moment only, but that moment was more than enough for the hungry pack. In haunch and flank and throat, tearing fangs entered her flesh.

"Flee!" she bellowed to the calf. "Flee!"

And she sank dying to the snow. There was no help for the calf, however. One wise old warrior lurked in its path —La Sombra—and the slash of her teeth snapped a hamstring of the calf as neatly as a frayed violin string parts under the bow. The calf was down, also, and now there was no sound save the breathless snarling of the pack as they ate.

"Is it a wolf or a dog, El Trueno?" cried the happy mother. "Let the leader speak, and we will know the truth!"

But the leader pretended to be too busy with his meal to hear the taunts of La Sombra.

On the fifth day the food was gone. The call of El Trueno rang across the snows.

"The time has come, my brothers, for the hunting trail again! And who but El Trueno shall lead?"

All eyes turned to the terrier.

"Not I," said White Wolf. "It is true that I held the head of the elk while they pulled her down. But what of that?"

He heard La Sombra's snort of disgust.

"Modesty," said the mother stiffly, "is well enough in cubs. But you are a cub no longer, but a grown wolf. Speak to that tall braggart, my child. Tell him that he has led them for the last day, and that you, my boy, are now king of the pack."

"I?" gasped White Wolf. "Let him be

king of the pack, and I shall follow willingly, as before!"

HE SAW a green light of scorn in the eyes of La Sombra.

"I had sooner see you dead than to see you shamed. And shamed I shall not be through you!" Then she stood forward among them, hobbling on her three legs. "You wolves of the Dunkeld Hills, my son leaves words to yonder brown thief, El Trueno. And he bids me speak for him in this fashion: " 'I am not old in the ways of the mountains, for I have been long in the lowlands where men hunted for me as coyotes hunt for a mountain lion. But if you will have a heart without fear for your leader, accept me. As for wisdom, I have an ear for the council and a heart willing to listen to my elders. Rash blood shall not rule the pack that I lead.' Wolves of the Dunkeld, do you hear?"

"We hear, La Sombra, and he speaks well from your mouth."

"As for El Trueno," went on La Sombra, "my son bids me to say that that clumsy coward is unworthy to be king. But my son will be king in his place by the power of tooth and claw, as the law holds in these mountains."

"The law holds and is strong!" they yelled. And they stood up and chanted: "Do you speak, El Trueno?"

El Trueno had failed at the kill and had seen the White Wolf perform a deed of singular courage, nevertheless his heart was none the weaker in his breast.

"I have heard this chatter," he said in his deep voice. "I have smiled, for it comes from the mother of a white dog with the scent of a wolf on his pelt. Now hear me, youngster. This much grace I shall grant you. Take a start from here to the blasted pine on the edge of yonder hill before we begin to hunt you. But if you will fight, you will sleep tonight in the bellies of my pack, nevertheless. I give you the choice!"

White Wolf stood to his full height and shook himself.

"I am ready," he said. "Begin, El Trueno."

El Trueno launched himself straight at the bull terrier. He was an old and practiced fighter, and his leap was famous, but now his fangs cut empty air. For White Wolf had jumped to the side, and now whirled and leaped, driving straight at the head. There was a sharp clash of teeth, and both recoiled deftly from the shock, while the pack howled with delight.

"Are these the ways of the lowland wolves?" snarled El Trueno. "A good way to die, then, in the mountains. Prepare yourself, White Wolf, for I am coming!"

And he came indeed, a brown streak across the snow. Once more the terrier danced to the side, but just a fraction of a second too late to avoid the knife-edge of those reaching fangs. They slit his tender skin down the shoulder and the blood gushed.

"El Trueno conquers again!" bayed the Dunkeld wolves.

"Peace!" growled old Marco Blanco. "The first blood is not always the last, and the White Wolf is a tower of iron on his legs. Look!"

El Trueno had charged again. But now White Wolf had taken wings, it

[Turn page]

seemed. He danced from the path of El Trueno's lunge. He dipped under the darting head of the tall leader and wrenched away a brown tuft of fur. Then, flinging himself at El Trueno again, he secured such a grip as the Dunkeld wolves had never seen before. His muzzle was thrust into the gaping mouth of the leader, and his grip was fastened with all his tugging weight upon El Trueno's lower jaw.

It was the beginning of the end of the struggle, for with that hold fastened upon his nether jaw, El Trueno could not bite except by lifting eighty twisting, jerking pounds of bull terrier. His jaw muscles were paralyzed with effort, and as he gasped in desperation and struggle, the Dunkeld wolves stood stiff in wonder.

El Trueno had fought well and bravely, but now his spirit wilted and his tail drooped. He was wrenching as eagerly as ever, but wrenching to get free and turn tail—if only that grip would relax. It did, when El Trueno was dizzy and exhausted—and shifted faster than a hand could move to the throat of the doomed wolf. Deep and true the long, punishing jaw sank through loose fur and flesh and found the windpipe—and the life.

Through the red trance of White Wolf's joy, he heard the joyous voice of La Sombra:

"Stand back, my son! Let the pack see. The quicker his death the greater your glory. Let them see that El Trueno will never call the Dunkeld wolves to the hunting again!"

So White Wolf stood back, trembling still. But the eyes of El Trueno were glazed and his long, red tongue was lolling. One glance sufficed the pack, then they swarmed in upon the kill.

"Come!" cried La Sombra.

"Faugh!" said White Wolf. "Do not join that horrible feast, my mother. He is dead, but he is our own kind. When you and I grow old and weak, shall we go to the same death, La Sombra?"

* * * * *

Tucker Crosden was speaking to his daughter, as she stood at the back door of the cabin and peered intently to the south. "What's lying south, there? What's on the Dunkeld Hills? Is there a streak of black clouds, Molly?"

"No," said Molly Crosden. "It ain't nothing."

He finished his coffee and banged the tin cup on the table.

"Come here!" he growled.

She crossed the room and stood before him, half-frightened and half-weary. He pointed a forefinger like a gun at her.

"You tell me why you was lookin' at the Dunkelds like a dyin' calf, will you? And don't you be lyin', Molly."

"Because Mr. Gannaway went over them," she answered.

Big Crosden slumped back in his chair. "It ain't missing your ma that makes you lonesome, then? It's Gannaway!"

The fierceness slipped away from him.

"I ain't said that I was lonesome."

"You ain't said it, but I've seen it. I know you ain't happy here. I ain't the kind of company that would make a daughter happy."

"You are, Dad, and I love you!"

"For what would you love me?"

"Because you're my father, and there ain't any need of any other reason."

He laughed, and his laughter was like a groan.

"There is only one thing that ever loved me, really—The King!" said Tucker Crosden. "I tell you, Molly, that when I held him in my arms when he was dyin', he plumb forgot his pain. He licked my hand, and his head fell on my breast, and he died like that. *He* loved me, and remembering him is how I see that there ain't nothing like love in the other folks and the other dogs that I know. That's why you don't have to lie to me. Why, maybe it was worth everything even to have the knowing of a dog like The King! Besides, who knows but what he might come back to me?" He lunged through the open door into the snow.

His trap line presently was taking most of his attention. It wound from the end of Pekan past Silver Lake and to the margin of Lake Gun, a distance of about twelve miles. Every day he went the twelve miles through forest and hill and along the edges of the river and the lakes until he came to Lake Gun, then turned and swung back by the more southerly route among the taller hills,

where there was not such a depth of snow, as a rule.

Such a line of traps in such a country, freed from all competition, was bringing him a rich reward even in such a bad winter season as this. Today, lynx, a red fox, and a marten were his reward on the outward journey. If he counted the lynx at eight dollars, the marten at twelve and the fox at seven, he already had a handsome profit for this half of his day's work. And money meant a good deal to Tucker Crosden. Only one thing had kept him from amassing a considerable little fortune, and that was the fatal inability to keep from spending so much on bull terriers. He had been "dog-poor" for years, but still he liked money and all that it would bring to his family and himself. So his spirits were rising as he came to the end of the round.

He was ready to turn back for the homeward half of his march when he heard something like the distant explosion of a rifle. He hung in his stride and listened sharply. He had many reasons for wanting no wandering hunters or trappers in this valley.

Presently he made out the sound again, rhythmically repeated. Now he knew it to be still more ominous. An axman in the woods of the valley of the Seven Sisters!

HE STARTED forward at a run that carried him swiftly through the woods until he came in sight of the gleaming waters of Lake Rooney in the distance. Nearby stood a great mouse-colored dog, covered with curling hair. He had seen that dog before!

He went forward again with greater care, taking note of the musical duet of two axes which filled the frosty air. And presently he made sure of the calamity. A little clearing had been taken for a starting point, near a brook, and in the center of this space Dan and Tom Loftus had laid the foundations of a small cabin. They were felling trees for their building.

Crosden went out and stood before them. Tom Loftus picked up his rifle which lay conveniently at hand. Dan drew a revolver and whistled. Two wolfhands, and the odd-headed Grampus came swiftly in answer to the call.

"Friendly, ain't you?" said the giant trapper.

"We're as friendly as we need," said Tom Loftus. "You talk to him, Dan."

"I ain't got much to say," said Dan Loftus. "Except we've picked out this place to build our shack and we intend to stay here. We got a string of traps to put out. We don't hanker to bother nobody—and we sure don't hanker to *be* bothered!"

"There wasn't more'n about five hundred thousand square miles where you boys could of put up your shack and strung your traps," said Crosden. "You had to pick out this here valley!"

"Tell him, Dan," said Tom.

"I'll tell you this," said Dan. "Me and my brother figger you're a skunk, stranger, and maybe a crook! But we don't want none of your trouble and all that we ask of you, big fellow, is that you keep hands off. We've followed the trail of the lame wolf and the white wolf two hundred and fifty miles to the valley. He is the fur we want to get and no other. We got wolf traps, and that's all!"

The giant's scowl relaxed a little. "You keep in your places and I'll not trouble you none." he said. "But if your dogs bother my traps, I'll kill 'em! Think it over."

And he turned back to complete his march around the trap line.

VIII

ALL the days were days of war for the wolf pack. The mountains were barren of game, and to find living creatures, the wolves were forced to cast a great dragnet which covered a huge territory.

When the line of the main direction was established, White Wolf, La Sombra, and Marco Blanco—the leader and the two wisest heads of the pack—ran along the central line at a leisurely speed. Upon either side, scattered the rest of the tribe.

They ran at measured intervals of about a mile, and weaved from side to side a little, so that the ground was pretty thoroughly covered, what with a wise wolf's consciousness of the best places to look for game. The net which

was dragged was, when the pack numbered some fifteen or sixteen altogether, about ten or twelve miles across or perhaps four or five hundred square miles of countryside, when the pack meant business. Yet, even with such cunning planning, they had many a lean day.

Once their fast was broken in a strange way, for while they were coursing slowly over the lower valley of the Tomahawk River, a wolverine was sighted by Marco Blanco, a wolverine on the top of the dam of a colony of beavers, digging up the surface with his powerful claws. Marco Blanco gave one short cry, and this was echoed softly up and down the long line which began to converge rapidly toward the point of information. In a surprisingly short time, fifteen lean-bodied lobos lay in the naked autumn brush ready for the kill.

Wolverine is meat which only famine makes palatable to the most desperate wolf, but the Dunkeld pack was hard-pressed, and soon the rank body was devoured. After that, they worked on down to the water of the dam and feasted on the beavers.

A strange animal was scented in the marshes of the upper Winnemago and followed over the Winnemago hills until, in the valley of the Seven Sisters, the pack sighted a seven-foot beast with a huge head mounted upon long, spindling legs—a moose, driven far south from its usual range!

They reached it on the edge of a lake, but found it a more deadly foe than any elk. Two of the younger wolves went down before White Wolf made his flying leap and gripped the moose by the nose with jaws of fire. It could have split him in two with one blow of its splay forefeet, but the first instinct was to rear back from the painful leech, and in that moment the pack had closed on the foe.

Watching them as they swarmed upon the fallen animal and glutted themselves, disgust rose in the heart of White Wolf, aversion which he could not explain. He only knew that wolves and wolf-ways were to him utterly abhorrent and so he turned and trotted through the woods until, from the top of a low hill, he saw Pekan Lake before him and, near its head, a smoke column that rolled through the trees.

White Wolf stopped with a thrilling temptation he had never felt before.

What he saw was a drift of woodsmoke, made from the house of that Man whose planted steel teeth had imprisoned La Sombra, but what he thought of was the mellow lowlands of a summer's day, with such drifts of smoke as this streaked across the face of the landscape, and the lowing of the cattle, and the scent of the grain fields, and the sweetness of drying hay.

White Wolf thought of the houses of Man, and the dogs, and their foolishly sharp, barking voices. And he thought, too, of the voice of Man. He remembered how those two who had followed the six hounds at Winnemago had roused their dogs to maddest courage by a mere shout or two.

It was well to be the king of a wolf pack, an honor. However, he was wishing with all his heart to be back in the lowlands, and not with the Dunkeld pack trailing at his heels.

He heard an evil, sneering voice behind him. "Look well, White Wolf!" the voice said. "It is a sign of the slavery to come. Look well, White Wolf!"

HE SAW that same mangy old red fox he and La Sombra had met as they were climbing up the valley of the Winnemago.

"So you are not in the lowlands, after all?" asked White Wolf.

"You see me here!" sneered the fox. "I am not what I once was, and after the dogs ran me once, I saw that the second time would see my finish. There is barely enough speed left in me to let me scoff at those fools, the wolves. Are you a wolf, my young friend?"

"Old scoundrel," said the terrier, whining with rage, "ask your nose! What does it tell you?"

"It tells me a disgusting thing—wolf! But that may be a borrowed scent. I must admit that I have never seen a wolf exactly like you before! And certainly I have never seen one with such a ridiculous tail which is never still."

White Wolf turned his head and looked back.

"Every wolf to its own liking!" said he. "I think my tail does very well!"

"You *would* think so," said the fox. "However, it seems to me that you might have the sense to teach your tail dignified manners. But manners in a wolf is something I long ago gave up trying to find. However, I have a foolish partiality for you."

"I am not going to thank you," snarled White Wolf. "Yet I should like to know what has made you presume to make an exception of me?"

"In the first place," said the fox, tipping his head a trifle to one side, "it is because you are such a caricature of a wolf!"

"So!" cried White Wolf, bristling with anger. "Have I not a pair of eyes, four feet and a set of strong teeth, old villain?"

"You have, exactly," said the fox with his evil grin. "So has a fox, a lynx and a dog, my young friend!"

"You are talking nonsense, Red Fox," White Wolf growled. "Dogs are disgusting. If you insist on comparing me with them, I shall listen to you no longer!"

The mangy fox grinned. "But what I wanted to talk to you about I haven't touched on, as yet," he said.

"Keep it to yourself," replied White Wolf.

"Think it over before the lone wolf makes a meal of you—the Black Wolf, of course!"

It was a tender point with White Wolf. There were not many things in the forest that he feared, but the Black Wolf remained to him a phantom of dread.

"I have not done with Black Wolf," he said gravely. "I promised him that one day I should take him by the throat and shake the life out of him. When you see him again, remind him that I shall keep my promise. I have killed three wolves up to now. May Black Wolf, who left La Sombra alone to care for her cubs, be the fourth."

"I have told him already," said the mischief maker. "He promises to tear you to bits the first time he can find you away from the pack. However, there is still the matter of that smoke you were watching. Now should you dispose of Black Wolf—which is most unlikely—you will still have the Man to deal with."

"I have thought of that, too," said White Wolf. "If his throat is ever in reach of my spring, he shall die, Red Fox! I swear it by the mother who bore me!"

"Ah!" said Red Fox. "And what mother bore you, pray?"

"Old fool!" cried the terrier. "Every wolf and coyote in the mountains knows that I am the son of La Sombra. The very chipmunks would tell you the same."

"As for chipmunks and such other noisy idiots," said Red Fox, "they do not matter. But still I cannot help asking if you have never wondered how La Sombra could be your mother? Look carefully at your image in the lakes."

"You think I am blind?" said White Wolf.

"Not blind in the eye but in the brain. White Wolf, study what you see, compare yourself with La Sombra and ask yourself how she could ever be your mother!"

"I am going," said White Wolf. "You do nothing but irritate me. Good-by!"

BUT when White Wolf came to the edge of Pekan Lake, he jumped to a stone a dozen feet from the shore and examined himself with a scrupulous attention in the glasslike waters. Truly his tail was far, far from the tail of a wolf, and his long, wedge-shaped head with its little triangular black eyes was not like the noble head of a wolf.

"Faugh!" said White Wolf with a little shudder of disgust. "I am almost as much like a snake as I am like a wolf. It is no wonder that the pack does not love me. And even La Sombra . . . Does she love me, or is her interest because I protect her and bring her to the chance of food?"

It had been an old torment to him. The young wolves of the pack admired him and the old wolves respected him, but they never opened their hearts to him and no eye brightened when he came among them. They remained critically aloof and something in the heart of the young dog remained starved.

The wind ceased and, when he came to the next clearing, he saw the smoke column rising steadily like a thin arm.

Toward this he kept on his way, but the lessons of La Sombra were not forgotten. Approaching this dreadful objective, he came carefully up the wind, noting all the thronging and ominous scents —food raw and cooked, and iron, and the scent of the sharp voice that kills far off and, mingled with all this, the scent of Man.

But he would not turn back. If his hair bristled with dread, and if he stopped when he first heard the human voice, still he went on until he came to the edge of the clearing and crouched behind a stump.

A rabbit rose before him and fled with frightened leaps to the center of the open space where Gannaway and Molly Crosden sat together on a fallen log. The rabbit took shelter between them, and the heart of White Wolf leaped into his throat. How came it, he wondered, that the rabbit dared to run to these two in the extremity of its terror and that it now took hiding between them?

The slender hand of the girl reached down—and the soul of White Wolf stood still to see that the little frightened thing put up its ears and brightened its eyes as though it loved the touch! What a miracle to be written down in his heart of hearts and repeated. It would take much explaining from Mother Wolf!

He had heard the voices of Men before, and always in a common key of harshness. But now he heard, for the first time, gentle question and gentle response and it was a miracle to be brooded upon, stranger even than the bravery of the rabbit.

"There's this thing to think of, Molly," Gannaway was saying. "You're not happy here. You've confessed that yourself!"

"Oh, ay," sighed Molly, and the heart of the bull terrier softened at the tone of her sadness, "I'm not terribly happy, but mostly folks don't seem to be so awful happy any place." She smiled crookedly at him. "But let's not talk of that, Mr. Gannaway. Sure, I'd like to talk. But I dunno that it would be a good thing. Most likely it's better that you should guess some things and not know them at all!"

He smiled, but sadly.

"I understand. If you were to tell me the truth of your unhappiness, then there would be nothing left to me, as an honorable man, except to get you away from these mountains and back to your mother." He paused. "I have to go off on another trip soon, Molly," he went on after a moment. "And I hate to go. This is a thing that I've dreaded to talk to you about. But I *have* to talk to you about it, and this is what I have to say: Your father is not better now than he was a few weeks ago, when I came down from the Winnemagos on that other trip."

"Ay," assented Molly, "he's not better."

"The King is in his mind more than ever, I suppose."

"Ay, The King is in his mind—every evening!"

"And how many times in the day, too, when he's off walking his trap line?"

"I dunno," said Molly. "I don't like to think of it."

"And," cried Gannaway with a sudden great effort, "when that—excitement—takes hold of him, do you know that I'm afraid of him?"

SHE sat up a little straighter and stared with a white face.

"What are you gonna say, Mr. Gannaway?"

"Oh, you know, Molly dear. I'm going to say that your father, on the subject of The King, is a dangerous man—dangerous to me though I'm his friend, and dangerous even to you though you're his daughter whom he loves! And that's why I'm going to take you away, Molly my dear. You're going back into the house to take what you need, then you're going to start off with me. Quickly because we need every minute of time we can get!"

There was a flash of light in the face of the child, then she shook her head slowly.

"He would catch us," said Molly. "And if he caught us—"

Gannaway loosened his collar a little.

"It's a chance I have to take," he said huskily. "And it's a chance you have to take. Molly, hurry and get what you need."

But she smiled at him as she shook her head.

"Jiminy, Mr. Gannaway," she said, "I know what Dad meant when he said that you was a white man. Because you are, most awfully much. But what would happen when he come back to the cabin and found himself alone in it? Oh, I ain't much company for him, but I'm something. If I was to go, he'd be lost for good and all. He'd never come back to himself again! You tell me man to man if that ain't right!"

Gannaway strove to lie but the necessary words stuck in his throat.

At that same time a shadow slipped to the side of White Wolf, and he heard the whisper of La Sombra:

"See if the dread that was in me was not true! Oh, my son, do you not know that the traps of Man are of many kinds and that he does not catch with teeth of iron only? Swiftly, come with me!"

The terrier slunk behind her, but with such a careless footfall that the noise called the eyes of the girl after them and she sprang up with a cry.

"What is it, Molly?"

"A wolf—and something white behind it! Mr. Gannaway, could it be the White Wolf?"

IX

THE wolf pack left the bones of the fallen moose on the next day and by the will of Marco Blanco headed over the hills and into the lower Dunkeld valley. And there they came upon Red Fox sitting on a crag.

"Are these the wolves of the Dunkeld pack?" cried the fox.

"These are they," howled Marco Blanco. "What will you have of us, oh mangy devil?"

"Are these the wolves, then, whose leader runs last on the hunting trail?"

"Come down, little one," answered La Sombra in a snarling rage, "and look into the mouth of that slow-footed leader. For he carries the reason for his leadership in his mouth and in no other place."

"Is it the lame wolf there?" said Red Fox, peering down. "Tell me, wise mother, did you not find him with the new scent of Man on him yesterday?"

"May the buzzards pick your bones before night!" howled La Sombra. "Do not heed him, brethren. Let us go on."

But the wolf-pack had paused, and now they sat on their haunches and pointed their noses upward.

"So—you are like a circle of cubs ready to receive wisdom from their father," mocked Red Fox. "Then listen to me, little ones! Is it wolf-dog,or dog-wolf who leads you? If his mother is La Sombra, look at her and look at him. Does his tail keep his nose warm of a night? Tell me if you are wolves, and blind also!"

They answered him with yells of indignation. Red Fox laughed.

"Look on him, wolves," said he, "and see clearly. But to teach you that I am your friend in all things, and the picker of the bones which you leave behind in your kills—the heavy-headed liar and braggart, the Black Wolf, thought the wind was in his heels and he chased me this morning, because even my mangy skin looked like food in his eye. May he die and rot for it. But now I am here, and he is lying in a little cave on the bank of the Dunkeld River, a shallow little cave where three could come at him at once! Do you hear me, brothers?"

"We hear you!" they yelled in ecstatic answer. "We hear you, and we are gone."

"As for what I tell you of your leader, I give it out of the fullness of my wisdom. Come to me when you would learn more, and I shall tell you all. And so, farewell!"

White Wolf, quivering with rage, looked up as the pack swept down toward the canyon and saw the old fox smile. Then La Sombra, hobbling at the side of her foster son, spoke.

"Ah," she said bitterly, "that ever such words should be spoken by a cur of a fox about a son of mine, of my body and blood! And that the pack should have listened as if they half believed!"

"Let the fox talk and the pack listen," White wolf replied. "They need me still for the kill and they will keep me, unless old Marco Blanco edges me from my place. Have you seen him talking with the young wolves?"

"Am I blind?" gasped La Sombra, laboring heavily in her stride. "And I have heard him talk of the kills he has made running at the head of a greater

pack than ever was that of the Dunkeld Hills! The traitor has evil in his heart, my son. But trust in me. Now run, for the goal is Black Wolf, tonight!"

He ran with all his power, leaping ditch and creek in the trail of the pack, while the moon rose high above the black mountains. They reached the broad lands of the valley. They crossed them to the woods beside the Dunkeld, and down the river, running softly. But, struggle as he might, in the course of that hard run the White Wolf was far behind, and all he knew of the first view of the quarry was a chorus of yelps and snarlings and one loud howl of pain from far ahead.

WHEN he came up he saw a dying member of the pack lying in the mouth of the cave where, as Red Fox had promised, they had found Black Wolf. The trail carried across to the farther lofty bank where stood Black Wolf on the top. The Dunkeld wolves had waited for their white leader, but now they charged up the slope of crumbling gravel and sliding sand.

They were met by a whirlwind of destruction. The great black lobo fairly tore out the throat of the first of the pack to reach the ledge and sent it choking and dying to the bottom of the rise. He reached the jugular vein of the second, and the rest recoiled in terror from the destroyer—all except White Wolf, who clambered hard up the yielding face of the slope, clamoring in his foolish, thin voice:

"The White Wolf is come! Black devil, this is the day of your death!"

"Do you dare to face me alone?" growled the monster.

White Wolf, staggering on the edge of the upper slope, saw destruction rush at him. All he could do was to take the blow, and the sharp fangs of the giant ripped along his neck and through the cushioning muscles of his shoulder. Such a stroke had never been received by the terrier before. And the force and the pain of it tumbled him head over heels to the bottom of the rise. But a moment later he was struggling blindly to rush the slope again, only to be blocked by La Sombra.

"Are you mad?" she panted. "He has killed three already. Will you make yourself the fourth?"

Her foster son danced up and down, regardless of the blood that streamed and then caked upon his shoulder.

"Come to me, Black Wolf!" he yelled. "Or give me a chance to climb the bank and meet you on fair ground."

"What talk is this of giving?" snarled the giant. "When I give, I give death! Have you heard me, White Wolf? I see your young wolves climbing to take me in the side while the rest of you take me in the front. So I am gone. Remember me, wolves of the Dunkeld. I leave three dead ones. Come to me again, and I shall claim still more. What? Are you wolves? No—coyotes! I scorn you. See if there is so much as a scratch upon my front! Then see your dead and your white leader. Is he white now? He is the color of mud and of blood. Farewell!"

He was gone, and La Sombra, licking the shoulder of her son, whispered:

"You have missed in the kill as El Trueno missed in the kill before you. Be prepared for more fighting, White Wolf, before the dawn."

He looked across at the pack. There were eight left alive, and they sat together in a closs mass, facing him, with old Marco Blanco a little to the front. He lay down, licked his paws, and when he spoke it was with a cruel glance.

"How many are dead tonight?" he asked.

"There are three dead tonight, Marco Blanco."

"Ah," said the old wolf, "three strong wolves! But they are the first in a long time." He stood up and shook himself savagely. "What? Have you a leader who feeds you on your own flesh?"

There was an ominous growl.

"What shall I say to them?" asked White Wolf anxiously of his mother.

"Tell them that their own rashness caused the loss. And it was the steepness of the bank that allowed Black Wolf to destroy the two. Say that and—"

But White Wolf strode a stiff-legged step or two toward them. He looked down the line of savage faces, one by one, and their glances shifted away. Plainly they dreaded him still.

"Now," said he, "I shall not speak to defend myself. I shall not waste much

speaking on wolves who listen to the voices of mangy foxes. This is the thing that I say: There is a law in these matters. I have missed in the kill. And, therefore I am no longer worthy of leading. But you will fight me one by one and not two by two. Stand up, then, the best of you. What, Marco Blanco, do you not hear me?"

BUT, greatly as Marco Blanco might have yearned for the sole leadership of the pack, he wished no single combat with this dreadful fighter.

"Evil fall to the lot of your belly, Marco Blanco!" White Wolf snarled. "I have honored you and made you great in the pack and you have used my kindness to destroy me. But if you will not fight, call for the best and the bravest and let him come with you. You are old, though your teeth are still strong. Stand up, then, and let your best comrade stand up with you. I, the White Wolf, shall fight you together. For I tell you, wolves of the Dunkeld, that my heart is big with scorn of you. Look, now, I give you my side and my flank to jump it. I walk here before you and I invite you. Who moves? Who leaps? What, not one? Is the red fox a true speaker? Are these only the souls of coyotes in the pelts of wolves? Faugh! I leave you, and I despise you. Let no one follow me. Marco Blanco, take the pack, for I give it to you freely. Farewell!"

He passed to La Sombra, and she whined:

"Are we outcasts, also?"

"Peace, La Sombra," said he. "It is no time for much speaking. Let us go, for my heart is sick in me. . . ."

La Sombra was sick. She had been like a queen in the pack while White Wolf ruled those warriors of the Dunkeld Hills. Now they were thrust out, and she was never weary of whining:

"If you had stayed, all would have been well. Could Marco Blanco have driven you out? No, and the others would never have been willing to pay the price in fighting the two of us. And now the Dunkeld Pack will come to ruin.

[*Turn page*]

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Marco Blanco is not only a traitor, but he is too old to lead. He will miss every kill and they will laugh in his face. They will all come to ruin, and this might all have been avoided if you, my son, had swallowed your pride and switched your tail in their faces. But now we are outcasts. The winter is long and cold. And, ah, how the wind moans! I am sick. I fear that I shall never live to be strong again, for the heart is gone out of me!"

He regarded her helplessly. There was nothing he could do except to leave her while he went out and did his best to hunt for two, when there had never been food for one, even, before they joined the pack! That, too, had been in the early winter. Now that the cold season had reigned for weeks, what chance was there that they might escape starvation? However, there was no use in lingering in the cave and freezing and starving by degrees. He stepped from the cave into the open air, and started on his quest.

White Wolf began his hunting to the west. He stumbled up the shore of Lake Pekan until he reached its head, when his ear was caught by a furious little splashing on the shoreline ahead of him, and a catlike spitting. Even his nose could tell him that this was mink. He stood above the raging little demon which had been caught while at its fishing by one of the traps of Tucker Crosden. Unless he wanted to receive the two needlelike fangs in his head, it behooved him to attack with care. But the mink was blinded with such rage in fighting with the trap that it paid no heed to the other enemy above it. White Wolf, when he sprang, by good luck closed his teeth on the back of the mink's neck. And one shake tore the life from the lithe, snaky body.

He had only one impulse, and that was to carry the prey to Mother Wolf, where she waited in the cave. But the trap held it firmly in place, so he ate the mink on the spot, standing in the icy water, and then resumed his hunt. He was on the trail of the trapper, now, well-marked from trap to trap, and that was the trail he followed. He came from time to time, to the deadly scent of iron, and he knew that Man had planted teeth in the ground at these places, such teeth as had maimed La Sombra. So he made a brief detour about each trap and went on cautiously until he saw the glimmer of eyes before him and then, under the stars in a thicket of naked brush, he saw the old red fox, watching him with his eternal grin.

"So the leader has left the pack?" said Red Fox softly. "It is no matter. They were not worthy of your leading. But they are in trouble already. Marco Blanco has twice missed the kill and the others yearn for the White Wolf. Go back to them. You will find them prowling between Mount Spencer and Lomas Mountain. Go, and good luck go with you."

WHITE WOLF licked his thin lips and smiled.

"You take me for a stupid cub," said he. "But I read your mind, Red Fox. You wish to turn me from this trail. But I shall go on, and see what I can see."

"Keep you from Man's trail through the woods? Not I! But I tell you this for the safety of your skin—this trail is thickly planted with traps. It is a trapper's trail you follow, and sooner or later, that is death!"

"As for traps," said White Wolf calmly, "I know them from my own experience and from the teachings of La Sombra. But what deviltry is in you? I know you hate me, Red Fox. Do you think that I would take advice from an enemy? There is something on this trail you would hide—and this is it!"

For passing through the brush, he saw, between two saplings, a magnificent dog fox with a hind foot caught in the trap. The prisoner stood up and faced White Wolf with bristling hair.

"Leave him, White Wolf," Red Fox snapped, "or while you leap at him from the front, I shall leap at you from the rear, white devil though you are!"

"Will you?" said the terrier, and he leaped straight at the older of the two.

Red Fox fled wildly from destruction, but the dog did not try to send that charge home. Instead, he turned and rushed at the prisoned fox. A blow of his shoulder, wolf-wise, stretched the

poor fox helpless. And the long, punishing jaw of White Wolf crunched out the life in the neck of his victim. Fox flesh was not all to his liking, but famine had provided him with a catholic taste. He completed the meal of which the mink had provided the first portion, then chewed the hind leg of the victim clear of the trap. Taking firm hold on a rear leg—after a fashion which La Sombra had shown him—he threw the body across his back." Starting on the homeward journey he anticipated the joy of Mother Wolf when she saw such ample fare brought to her.

He left the curving line of the river and the lake, however, and cut inland to take the straightest path for the cave where he had left La Sombra mourning. And so for the second time in his life he came upon the clearing where Tucker Crosden's cabin stood. He came just in time to see Molly come out with a pail to fetch water from the lake, leaving the door ajar.

Now that the mouth of the cave of Man had been opened and left wide, what better time was there for looking into its mysterious deeps? White Wolf laid down the body of his fox and stole forward. Reaching the door, he gave a guilty glance around its edge, and inside, saw the back of the Man. He was leaning over a gun, busily cleaning it. Suddenly the monster turned, and his eyes fell on White Wolf. There was miraculous power in those eyes, and White Wolf felt a dreadful impulse to crawl forward into the cave and lie stretched at the feet of Man! He did not shrink back even when Man stretched forth his two terrible hands and whispered:

"The King!"

Still White Wolf stood transfixed.

"The King!" said Man again, and rose from his chair, until it seemed to White Wolf that he would never have done rising. Still with his hands stretched forth, he moved a half-step toward the terrier.

White Wolf waited for no more. He forgot the body of the dead fox. He forgot the hunger of La Sombra. All that he wanted was the comfort of her presence and the assurance that her ready wits would give him as he headed straight for the cave.

TWO huge lobos stood at the entrance, but as he streaked forward, they drew to either side.

"Enter, White Wolf!" said one. "And have no fear. For we are of your pack!"

"Is it so?" purred La Sombra from the thick shadow. "What is his pack? Has he not denied it and left it? Shall he go back to you when you would have betrayed him once?"

"We were fools. But all of us are not very old, and the tongue of Marco Blanco was a wicked tongue. Was it not?"

"It was a wicked tongue," said the other ambassador.

"Has even Marco Blanco sent to invite White Wolf back?" asked Mother Wolf.

"Marco Blanco is dead," said the first ambassador. "My own teeth were in his flank. And, now of the old pack, there are only five left, and all of us grow thin. We want White Wolf for our leader. In the days when he led us, we were fat."

"There was not one week of famine in all the time that he led us," said the second emissary. "Now we have nothing but hollow days. Consider, White Wolf!"

"Go back to the pack," said White Wolf. "I shall come, no doubt, in the morning. Wait for me on the shoulder of Spencer Mountain."

They snarled with veritable joy and then stole away beneath the skeleton trees. White Wolf threw himself down beside La Sombra, and before he could speak, for panting, she had read half his story with her nose.

"What is this, my son? Your feet are rank with—Man!"

"I have seen the face of Man!" he told her. "I looked into his cave and saw his face!"

She gasped. "Is it that? And did you not tremble in pure dread?"

"Dread?" said White Wolf. "I do not know. No, it was not like fear. I am going back, Mother, and—"

"Never, White Wolf! He sets other traps than steel ones for us, be sure!"

"I go back, only for the sake of bringing you the fox I left when Man frightened me away."

"Come straight to me, thereafter!"

"Straight as a hawk for the nest."

"I shall wait for you at the foot of the hill, or perhaps nearer. Good hunting, my son!"

X

IN the heart of Adam Gannaway, all was not well.

"I have told your father that I am heading for the lowlands and better weather," he told Molly, when he left her that morning. "But, between you and me, I am going to see if his situation with the law is as bad as he considers it to be. It may be better, Molly. When a man is barred from his own door by a fellow who has no authority to stop him, and when he strikes that man down not in malice but to clear his path—I don't know. Anyhow no harm can be done if I find out."

Nevertheless, the meteorologist could not escape the feeling that he was deserting the girl in time of need.

His way to the lowlands led up the valley of the Seven Sisters, and he passed the shack of the Loftus brothers, whom he had not seen in some ten days. He paused to stop at the closed door, and Dan Loftus, revolver in hand, opened it a little and peered out. He did not invite Gannaway inside.

"What's wrong?" said Gannaway.

"Did I say that anything was wrong?" asked Loftus, without friendship.

"Why, man," said Gannaway, "I've simply stopped to pass the time of day with you on my way to the lowlands. Is this the way to talk? Where's your brother?"

"About his business," said Dan Loftus. He added with a gleam in his eye: "Maybe you're leavin' the Crosden shack because you and the big feller have fell out?"

There had been no trouble, Gannaway assured young Loftus. "And the White Wolf?" he asked.

"The damn critter ain't been seen," replied Dan. "But we've spotted his trail here and there in this valley, and we'll get him yet. So long!" And he closed the door in Gannaway's face.

Gannaway slept that night in a dell on the side of Mount Spencer, and had just resumed his journey the next morning when he saw five horsemen riding through the light of dawn. He thought of hailing them, at first, but checked that eager impulse and, unslinging his strong field-glasses, turned them on the leader of the group. It was Tom Loftus, with his rifle balanced across the pommel of his saddle.

What was he doing there at the head of such a body of men? Horses were not used in such pursuits as an attempt to capture White Wolf, or such hunting as Tom and his brother might plan. He scanned the other members of the group, and as they rode into the great circle of the glass, he saw that each grim-faced man was armed to the teeth, with rifle and revolvers. Clearly, they were either fugitives from the law or, what was far more likely, they were riding at the behest of the law.

That explanation fitted in with a fear Gannaway felt when he saw Tom Loftus' face. There was no love lost between the Loftus brothers and big Crosden. These riders were lawmen, coming to seize Tucker Crosden. And perhaps some small reward would then slip into the calloused palm of the wolf-hunter.

Gannaway gave up all thought of the lowlands. He turned sharply around, and he wondered if he could distance the horsemen, and warn Crosden in time.

In the meantime, Molly Crosden had returned to the cabin with the filled bucket. As she approached the door her father rushed out into the night and she heard him cry:

"King! D'you hear me? King!"

There was such wild joy as well as sorrow in his voice that Molly set down her bucket and wrung her hands. There was little doubt in her mind that this was perfect madness, and no doubt at all when, some time later, he returned to the cabin and stood in front of the photograph of The King, looking intently upon it and muttering:

"There ain't any difference, except that he looked bigger. But how would The King come back, except bigger and better than ever?"

His muttering stopped, and he began to pace up and down the cabin. In a voice of terrible quiet, he said:

"I would like to have you tell me, Molly, why you done it? Will you tell me that?"

"What, Daddy?" said the child. "What have I done now?"

THE madness leaped straightway into his eyes, and yet he fought it down with an effort that left him trembling.

"I'm gonna keep a grip on myself," he said, "only I ask you, have you been stayin' up here all of the time pretendin' to care for me, but really just waitin' for the time to come when you could send The King back if he was to come to me?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Molly.

He caught her suddenly by the wrist and hurled her to the floor. When she looked up to his face she was sure she was to die.

"Will you tell me," said Tucker Crosden, "that you didn't see him standing right there at the door? The King that had come back from the grave to me, d'ye hear? It was The King, and you knew it, and your ma sent you here to keep him from me!"

His voice had become a scream and with the last words she felt his great hand fumbling at her throat.

"I didn't see The King standing there," gasped Molly, in panic. "I was sort of dazzled, Daddy. I didn't make out really what was in the light in the doorway."

"Are you gonna try to lie forwards and backwards?" groaned Tucker Crosden. "Then I tell you that there ain't a place in this here world for you. There ain't room for you and me in the valley of the Seven Sisters."

She saw the active devil glittering in his eyes.

"You ain't gonna murder me?" screamed Molly. "I'm your own girl! You—you'll go to hell for it!"

All breath was shut from her throat, and spinning blackness swung before her eyes. Then she found herself lifted and pitched bodily through the doorway. A cold drift of snow received her like a bed of feathers, and above her she heard the vague thunder of Tucker Crosden's voice.

She raced blindly away. She crossed the clearing and fled through the cold quiet of the night. She ran with a nervous frenzy, and hurrying as she did without regard for where her feet fell, it was a wonder that it did not happen sooner, but presently a mouth seemed to gape at her from the ground; sharp teeth seized her leg and she was jerked upon her face. . . .

When she wakened, she was very cold. She thought at first that she was in the cabin, again, and then her hand touched the icy surface of the crusted snow. She tried to move, and the numbness of her leg was replaced by a long, thrusting pain. She knew, then, that a wolf trap of the largest size had caught her, and the instant she examined it she saw that it was futile even to attempt to open it. As she was still studying it, she felt something colder than the wind prying at her body, then saw, half in shadow and half in the moon, a wolf as large as a bear, a monster in a jet-black coat.

She lifted a stick, with a shout, and threw it with such good aim that it struck the wolf across the face. But it did not so much as wince. He merely took two or three rapidly gliding steps toward her, and paused again. And she saw that his belly was drawn fine with famine. . . .

When White Wolf left the cave of his foster mother and started down the valley, he ran easily and strongly. Quickly he reached the edge of the clearing and took stock of his surroundings. The door of the house was still open and he was tempted to look in, but duty called him first to the fox. He hurried across the clearing to the spot where he had dropped the animal. All that remained of the fox was a few bloody tufts of fur. Rage consumed him, and he bared his teeth, but a moment later he was running in short circles, sniffing at the snow.

He had come upon the only power which had a greater attraction for him than the door of Man's house—the faint scent of Black Wolf upon the crusted surface of the snow!

Instantly he was darting up the trail, which freshened each moment beneath his nose. It diverged from the straight line along the bank of a creek. Then he found where the wolf had leaped across

and presently the bull terrier heard a sudden snarl, and the sharp cry of a human voice. It was a cry of utter terror.

HE LEAPED through the screening brush and, in the center of a patch of moonlight, saw what turned his blood to ice—the Black Wolf! And a yard from his slavering jaws the crouched figure of Molly Crosden! Looking on, mockingly, was old Red Fox!

The man scent on Molly blew clearly to White Wolf's nostrils, and yet she was so little formidable that she cowered before a single wolf! With the same words of the Man she cried in wonder and terror:

"The King! The King!"

Black Wolf jumped backward and snarled:

"Is it the white child of La Sombra again? Look, fox, for there will be meat for both of us this night!" Then to White Wolf he flung the challenge: "Dare you face me, or will you crouch at the feet of Man's child, son of La Sombra?"

"It is the time which I promised you long ago when you hunted me at the edge of the lake," snapped White Wolf. "I swore then that the time would come when I should hunt *you,* oh eater of carrion. And it is now that I take you by the throat, so!"

White Wolf rushed, checked himself mid-charge, then dived long and low for the legs of Black Wolf. He took a punishing cut across the back, but found a grip on a foreleg, and as fate would have it, that was the very spot where the teeth of Nelly, long before, had gripped the monster and brought him near to destruction. The howl of Black Wolf rang above the trees and the old red fox cowered in the snow with astonishment.

Molly Crosden could not even whisper at the miracle of this giant wolf striving with all his might to drag himself free, tugging until the whole body of the terrier came clear of the snow and whirled with resounding thumps against the trunk of pine or naked birch. But no buffeting could make him free his grip, and though the repeated slashes of Black Wolf covered his back with flowing crimson, he held on.

"Red Fox!" snarled the maddened wolf. "Do you leave this battle with a devil to me alone? Help me now, if you wish for meat or for revenge."

Red Fox, grinning, stole up behind. He had not the courage to try for a vital hold, but sank his time-worn teeth in the hip of White Wolf. Surprise did what pain could not have done. White Wolf whirled to take Red Fox by the neck. He snapped at a jumping shadow, for Red Fox had leaped for safety.

Black Wolf, nerved with fury, drove wildly in and beat the terrier headlong in the snow with the blow of his massive shoulder. He tried for the throat as the dog went down and tore across it, but that slash was too short. When he whirled again, as White Wolf struggled to his feet, an unexpected check delayed him.

Molly Crosden had forgotten the trap that held her leg, sawing deep into the flesh, and had risen to her knees. She saw Red Fox make his contribution, and was half-blinded with fury. She had nothing but the heavy root-end of a dead bush, but this she flung with all her might. It struck Black Wolf just as he was wheeling to beat his half-risen enemy into the snow again, knocking a bit of earth into his eyes. It was like the slap of a girl to a prize fighter, but it delayed the wolf just long enough to permit White Wolf to gather his feet beneath him and charge.

Black Wolf gave back, to spring again, but White Wolf was not waiting for sparring room. He heard the voice of the child behind him and knew that she was calling to him. He saw a stick flung from her hand strike Red Fox and send him to a distance with a yelp of fear. Then the teeth of the dog were locked across the face of the wolf.

Black Wolf wheeled to shake off the terrier. But the dog's hold would not give.

"Help, Red Fox!" cried the monster.

"I come, great brother!" snarled the fox. "I peril my life for thee and be it written thus in thy mind forever!"

RED FOX flung himself in, and sank his fangs in the haunch of White Wolf again. But this time it did not make the terrier loosen his grip. The

pain it cost him he put into his jaws, and forced his teeth through the flesh of Black Wolf.

It was an agony that drove Black Wolf insane. Though it left him half blinded and with the flesh of his face turned into a tattered mask, pouring blood, he lurched back to freedom, turned a somersault, and plunged blindly away from the terror.

He was given an instant's respite, for the tug of the fox at the hip of White Wolf delayed the dog, and when he had freed himself with a snap that sent Red Fox squealing away, Black Wolf was far off. Moreover, the hind leg of the terrier buckled under him when he tried to put weight upon it, and though a dog can run fast on three legs, that is only when the useless one is in front.

White Wolf took a staggering step or two in pursuit, then sat calmly down to lick his wounds. The child held out her hands to him and spoke in a voice that entered his soul like the sound of running water. He forgot to lick his wounds, and raised his head to listen to her. . . . .

The frenzy had died down in Tucker Crosden, and he sat in his doorway, his rifle across his knees, wondering in what direction he should follow his daughter. He sent a great bellow ringing through the cold air.

"Molly! Oh, Molly!"

Then he listened, but heard only the echo flung back from the nearest hill. That call accomplished one thing, however. For the flinging echo, striking from the hill against the ear of the fleeing Black Wolf, drove him from his course and so brought him, more than half blind with pain and blood, straight across the clearing and into the view of Tucker Crosden.

Crosden forgot everything else at that moment, except that this was something for which he had almost given over hope. He pitched the rifle to his shoulder and fired. Black Wolf left the ground in a last convulsive spring, and sent his death howl ringing over the trees and far away. Lying crumpled on the snow, he bit once at the place where the bullet had entered his body, then straightened and died.

Tucker Crosden strode out and stood exulting over him in utter silence until, faint and far on the western wind, it seemed to him that he heard a shrill barking, as though a dog, in the distance, were answering the cry of the wolf with another challenge.

The giant plunged off up the western trail, calling, "Molly! Molly!"

At last a response was heard distinctly—Molly Crosden, crying sharp and high:

"Daddy Tucker!"

He reached the place in hot haste and there he found Molly sitting with a huge bull terrier in her arms. She became a misty form in the background. The white body of the dog, slashed across dreadfully with red, was all that he could see.

"The King!" cried Tucker Crosden, fairly staggering with joy.

He would have rushed straight upon them had not a threatening snarl stopped him. For White Wolf was in doubt. He had kept this soft-handed child from death once, and he was not ready to release her to the first comer.

"He don't know me," said Tucker Crosden, as though the miracle were too great for his senses. "He don't know me, Molly. And if he come back to me, how could that be?"

"I don't know," said Molly, "but I *do* know he fought off the Black Wolf and made him run for it and saved my life. Oh, Dad, he fought like a hero! And now he's been sittin' here like a lamb, keepin' me warm!"

Tucker Crosden was on his knees in the snow, the better to conduct his examination. White Wolf no longer snarled. The scent of the same cave was on Man and child, and plainly it was folly to try to keep the father from the cub. However, in his last lingering doubts, he still stood his ground and curled his lip away from his fangs to show his willingness for battle.

THE wildness had been shocked from the brain of Tucker Crosden. The mad preconceptions which had obsessed him were rudely scattered, and now he saw that the ghost he thought poor Molly had frightened away from him was more the child's dog than his own. And the science of the breeder asserted

itself, also. These were not the inches of The King. Neither was it his bulk, but a veritable giant of a warrior. It crushed the heart of Tucker Crosden, but it freed him from illusion. And with a cleared brain he knelt beside Molly and freed her leg from the deep-sunk teeth of the trap.

"Molly," he said, raising her in his arms, "it ain't The King. There ain't no mystery, after all. There ain't no coming back from the grave. I've been a fool, and a terrible brute to you. How are you gonna forgive me?"

She lay back against his broad chest and smiled at him faintly.

"Forgiving you ain't hard, Dad," she said. "But I dunno that there ain't a mystery, because it sure looks to me like God sent him here tonight."

"He's follerin' us on!" said Tucker Crosden. "Look at him come! And how that wolf chawed him up! Is the leg hurtin' you bad, honey?"

"I'm too happy to feel pain. Only tell me, Dad. Him having come to me, like that, is he my dog?"

Her father drew a great breath. To give up all claim on this beautiful animal was like giving up his hope of heaven.

But he said at last: "What difference does it make? I didn't breed him—I didn't make him. Ay, he's yours, Molly. And a grand dog!"

XI

WHEN Tucker Crosden reached the cabin, he placed Molly on her bed and gently washed and dressed her wounded leg. The white dog stood watching. Crosden took a scrap of cooked venison steak and held it out.

"We got to have a name for him. Come here, old-timer, and sink a tooth in this."

White Wolf canted his head upon one side and observed with glistening eyes. It was a tasty trifle, no doubt. But it came from the hand of Man, and had he not been taught by La Sombra that the very smell of Man was the same as poison?

"He won't come near it," said the giant regretfully. "You try him, honey."

So Molly stretched out the bit of meat and called to him in a gentle voice. All the wisdom in his brain fought against it; all the new softness in his heart urged him forward. He reached the hand. The fragrance of the meat made an instant passage to his heart, and suddenly it was down his throat.

Instantly, also, he leaped back to the doorway and crouched there, studying the symptoms in his stomach. There were no bad ones. If this were poison, let him have much of it! So he stole back when the next bit was offered and picked it daintily and deftly from the slim fingers of the girl, with a wolflike slash of his fangs. He did not leap back this time, but merely crouched a little.

Presently, his head was beneath her arm and he was eating from her hand. As long as the big Man remained at a sufficient distance, all was well. Tucker Crosden seemed to sense the thought. He passed a pan of hot water to Molly, and she washed the wounds of back, haunch and throat, then rubbed on salve until the pain seemed to disappear.

When a faint sniff was heard beyond the crack of the cabin door White Wolf turned in a flash.

"There's something there!" said Molly. "You never should of closed it, maybe. Let him out, Dad!"

"Let him out? Maybe it would be the last of him!"

For White Wolf was crouched at the doorway tensed and desperately eager.

"If we make him hate us by keeping him here, he'll sure find a way of getting loose. Let him go, Dad, and he'll come back, I think."

"Would you take that chance?" asked Tucker Crosden.

"We got to take that chance."

"He's your dog," said her father, "and I ain't got the right to say how you should handle him. Old-timer, goodby!"

He jerked open the door, and White Wolf was a mere flash of a dog as he darted through it. But off at the edge of the moonlit clearing, the trapper had a single glimpse of a rangy wolf as it leaped clumsily, on three legs, into the brush. The next instant, White Wolf clove through the same spot of brush.

"Of all the foul things in the world,

there is nothing so foul as you, oh my son!" she said. "The stench of Man lives on you, issues from your breath, lies in your stomach, and the hand of Man has rubbed grease on your hurts. Is it not poison?"

"It tastes like the fat of good meat," said White Wolf. "You may see for yourself. And I tell you, my mother, that you are wise, and that you know far more of many things than your son can ever know, but of this one thing, of Man—"

"His name chokes me!" said Mother Wolf. "I am half afraid of you, my son, and I half hate you! Were you not in his den? And did I hear you fighting to escape from him?"

"Let me tell you one thing. It will fill you with wonder, and it will say more than you could guess. When the entrance to the cave was closed, I hardly noticed, for many other strange things were happening to me then! But when I heard you call, I leaped to the place and bade them let me go. And they did! As truly as you are the mother who bore me, they opened the door, and I ran freely out to you, as you see! I am free to go with you, whither you will."

"But will you go in happiness?" asked La Sombra.

"Why should I not? Let us go to our cave."

"Have you forgot the pack that waits for you?"

"The pack, then," said White Wolf. "But you go to them and call them here. You will find me not far from the clearing when you return!"

La Sombra asked no further questions but hurried off at her limping gait through the dark, to hunt for the wolf-pack which had been reported on the side of Spencer Mountain. But when they came back with her to where she had left her foster son, no White Wolf was there, and the questing wolves could find no trail of him. For half a dozen trails of horses swept up to the door of the cabin and then turned back up the valley of the Seven Sisters.

THE house was closed. No sign of man was here, but near the door La Sombra found the trail of her foster son, and all the tramplings of the horses could not blot out the scent for her. She hobbled steadily along it, until the whole pack was able to pick out the significant sign of their lost leader. They left La Sombra behind as they forged on, and the long swinging cry which they raised rang far and wide across the woodland.

Then, from the front, an answer came back to them. It was a howl which to the ear of a man would have been unmistakably wolf, only a little shriller and shorter than usual. But to the Dunkeld pack it was clear as day, and they knew that their lost leader was ahead of them.

La Sombra was not too far to the rear to hear the call, and now she labored up the slope. Standing between two shrubs at the top of the rise, she looked down into the shallow hollow beyond and saw a sight that made her grieve.

Yonder were five horses. Four men rode, and the daughter of Tucker Crosden sat in the fifth saddle, her head bowed weakly. Gannaway and the two Loftus brothers walked, and with them was Tucker Crosden, with his great arms tied behind his back. And there was White Wolf, skulking from shrub to shrub in pursuit!

To La Sombra this could mean but one thing. Man had won and she had lost and her strange son was being drawn from the mountains and the wolves forever.

"Go down softly!" said La Sombra to one of the pack. "Go down, Grey Wolf, and call my son back to us!"

Grey Wolf went softly, softly down, drifting from the shelter of bush to bush toward the terrier, but in the meantime, the caravan was mounting the further slope. The eye of Dan Loftus flicked back and saw the mere tip of the tail of the skulking lobo as he glided into cover. That sight was enough for Loftus.

"Hey, Grampus—hey, Pete, Doc!" he called. "Go find 'em, boys—that way!"

Sheriff Larned halted the procession to see those famous hounds run, and even the sullen face of big Crosden lighted as he watched. The lobo must have paused too long, undecided as to whether or not it could really have been seen behind its shrub, and when it started to run, the hounds were peril-

ously close. The run was bound to be short, with such a start. Even Grampus, slowest of the three, caught up with the frightened lobo, and Pete and Doc simply ran over the older dog.

"They're worth a treasure, Loftus!" cried the sheriff. "They'll have him in another six jumps! Hello . . . What's this?"

Whiter than the snow over which he ran, a gleaming streak showed from behind a tuft of shrubbery and darted straight for the race.

"Another dog—a bull terrier!" cried the sheriff. "Where in the name of all that's wonderful—"

"The White Wolf!" shouted Tom Loftus. "I told you, Dan, it was a damned queer wolf! Lend me your rifle!"

"Leave the dogs try their hands!" yelled Dan Loftus.

They tried, and their effort was over in a single second. White Wolf, reaching the racing hounds, dived up and under like a seal through water. His teeth found their mark, and the heavy wrench of his body as it flung under the tall hound, tore wide the throat of Pete. He fell and slid on the crusted snow. Before he reached the bottom of the slope he was dead.

GREY WOLF had wheeled to stand at the side of his rescuer. He cut to either side, right and left, and slashed Grampus and Doc cruelly. They were good fighters, but they were hurt. Here was a deadly foe before them and, just picking himself from the snow, was a white devil they had seen before and knew too well. They wheeled and bolted back down the slope far faster than they had come, but there was no pursuit.

"They have guns, young fools!" La Sombra was yelping frantically above them. "Break for cover!"

They followed her orders at their best speed, but one of them, at least, would never have reached shelter. For Dan Loftus had raised his rifle and was following White Wolf with a slowly, swinging gun, marking him down with a steady, practiced hand when Gannaway jumped out and knocked up the muzzle of the gun. It exploded high in the air, and White Wolf was gone.

THE two Loftus brothers closed upon Gannaway like snarling dogs.

"There was twenty-five hundred dollars under my trigger finger!" groaned Dan Loftus, pale with anger. "We'll have that out of your hide, Gannaway!"

But Adam Gannaway was cool. "The bounty is for a wolf, my friends," said he. "A small white wolf—not for a bull terrier!"

"It's for the animal that's been butcherin' cattle," said Tom Loftus, edging in with hard-gripped hands, "and the county has published the prints of his feet. Dog or wolf, yonder is the critter, and you've skinned us out of his scalp, Gannaway! Get your rifle up again, Dan. He's in that bush, yonder, and if he starts out, we'll nail him."

He swung his own rifle up and they started toward the shelter of the terrier.

No speed of thought and no courage of heart could have saved White Wolf now. He saw them coming, and he saw their ready guns, but when he looked around, a wide expanse of clear snow lay between him and the nearest woods. It was death to cross that open space, and he knew it.

"Larned," said Tucker Crosden, "no matter what the Loftus gents say, I say that dog yonder is one of my breeding and he belongs to my Molly. Are you gonna stand by and see him murdered?"

The sheriff was an honest man. He wanted nothing but justice for all.

"Hold up, Loftus—Tom!" he called. "You can't shoot a dog that belongs to another man. Not without a warrant. A dog is property the same as money in

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your pocket."

Dan Loftus kept his gun ready, but Tom turned to answer.

"Let's have his proof!" he cried. "You've seen that critter fighting *for* wolves. Is that the way of a man-owned dog? Lemme see Crosden's proof!"

"Ay," said the sheriff. "That's all reasonable enough. Talk up, Crosden. Can you call in your dog?"

"Molly," said Tucker Crosden, "go fetch him in."

She was weak from the wound in her leg and from exposure, as well as the sudden coming of the posse, but excitement buoyed her up. She was lifted from the saddle by Adam Gannaway, and hobbled slowly out across the snow [illegible] she was close to the bush. In he[illegible] she carried leash and collar. She knelt in the snow and held out her hands, and the breathless men up the slope could hear the murmur of her voice as she talked softly.

"It's no good!' said Tom Loftus, grinning. "She ain't gonna get no rise from him. It's one of Crosden's bluffs, Sheriff."

The sheriff looked at Tom Loftus, looked at the white, strained face of Tucker Crosden and knew that this was something more than an affair of a man and a dog. It had to do with a man and his very soul.

"We'll stay here," said the sheriff, "till we freeze the hosses into the snow. But the kid is gonna get her chance with the dog!"

It seemed hours, such was the tension of the long moments, but at last a bit of white glimmered through the brush, and then the faultless head of the terrier looked out on the valley, and shrank back. He looked out again, and came a step toward the girl. He knew he was standing in dreadful danger, but the sound of the girl's voice came to him like utter peace and brought a soft content upon his heart.

He stood before her, at last, and her cold, slow hands buckled the collar around his neck, and gripped the leash. So that, as all the posse could swear, White Wolf voluntarily yielded himself into the hands of the law. And what law could be too hard upon the self-surrendered enemy?

* * * * *

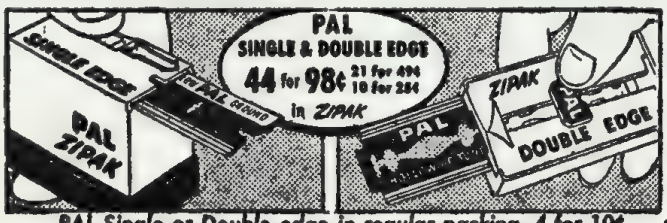
NO ONE could make out exactly what a bull terrier had to do with the trial of a man for murder, but of the people who crowded the courtroom only one in ten came to see the prisoner at the bar. The other nine fastened their gaze upon White Wolf.

It was too good a story for the newspapers to miss, of course. A dog which had run wild with wolves and brought a bounty of twenty-five hundred dollars on his head—and which had been raised by a wolfish foster mother, so it seemed—and who had now returned to the man who bred him. Such matters were not only "human interest" but they were headline stuff and they were used accordingly.

On the first bench sat Caroline Crosden, with her eyes never moving from the prisoner, so that when he chanced to glance at her now and then, she could catch his smile. That smile never failed to come faintly and slowly. For Tucker Crosden, on trial for his life, was at peace with the world!

What happened to him did not really matter for he had done his life-work, and that life-work appeared in the courtroom every day. Of course there was a rule against animals in the court, but the judge in that small town was an understanding man and when he heard that the bull terrier, on being left alone, went almost mad in the house, he allowed White Wolf to come with the prisoner's family. Molly sat next to her mother, and beside Molly the terrier sat up and looked the world in the eye.

[*Turn page*]



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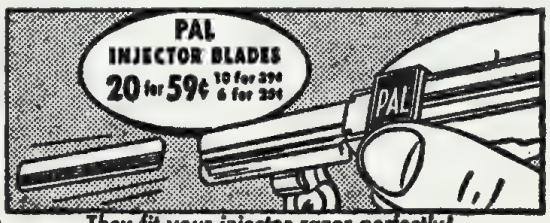

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It was all exciting to White Wolf. Human faces were more interesting to him than ever a blood trail had been in the San Jacinto Mountains. He could feel the curiosity and the kindness in the eyes that watched him, and there was such gentleness in their voices that his tail wagged instinctively.

However, they composed only a vague background in the front of which were two familiar faces—those of Molly Crosden and her father. Even Tucker Crosden was not really important, for there was room in the heart of White Wolf for only one great love, and that had gone out to the girl for whom he had fought and who had fought for him in the snows of the valley of the Seven Sisters.

Yet, when Tucker Crosden looked that way, the terrier could spare a brightening of the eyes, now and then, and even a whine.

The district attorney declared that the dog had ruined everything. How could he stand up and make his denunciation of Tucker Crosden as a brute beyond human control, a type of murderer, when an infernal dog sat on the first bench and let the jury see he loved this destroyer?

Crosden's young lawyer was not fool enough to overlook that point. He made his summing up speech by dwelling on the man, the dog, and the child, and when he ended, the jury went out for the shortest session that was ever held in the jury room of the courthouse. It came back with a verdict of not guilty.

And the courtroom cheered. Not for Tucker Crosden, but for White Wolf. And White Wolf seemed to understand, because he stood up and wagged his tail.

Said the Judge in part:

"When a man is barred from his own home by strangers—when God has placed more than normal power in his hands—is it his fault if he strikes harder than he thought to do, or is it the fault of the unlucky man who stood in his path? I do not think that Tucker Crosden is a murderer by nature. I look upon him as a worker, and a worker who has accomplished a great task!"

And the eye of the judge dwelt upon White Wolf.

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A PROPER PARDNER

Cordrey sat up with a gasp, his hand clutching his gun

PETE'S NEW partner had said he was going to pull stakes in the morning, and would Pete wake him up early? There wasn't any point in going on with things further, the husky blond youngster had stated.

"All the silver and all the gold which was to be discovered has been discovered," the broad-shouldered youth argued the point which had been argued for weeks now. "It's been discovered; but not by us."

Pete Cordrey didn't argue. Not with his mouth, he didn't. Badly as he needed a proper partner, a man who would undertake the main portion of the rugged physical work involved in mining for metals in the post-Civil War West whilst Pete Cordrey himself did the brain work, Pete knew better than to

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

argue. With his mouth, anyway.

Now, in the purple dark of the false dawn, Pete rolled out of his blanket and prepared to offer a rebuttal which might hold this youngster, this husky but suspicious and easily-discouraged youngster, for a bit longer.

The stove. The discolored, aged, faithful little pot-belly that squatted on uneven feet in the center of the small, rude shack.

Ever since Ned Meeks had got caught in that rockslide back in the Wasatch Range in Utah, Pete had hankered for another proper partner. Ned and Pete had been friends from the time Pete's left hip had stopped that Minie-ball at Petersburg, in the last of the war. Ned had been laid low by fever, and they had met in the hospital. It had been Ned who had suggested Pete's way of life ahead.

"Man with a stiff hip like yours, he's got to use his head and he's got to have a partner to do the heavy work. When you go west again to mine for gold, you'd ought to bring you such a man along with you." Then, after a slight pause: "When do we start, and where do you aim to dig in?"

Cordrey had been a west-bound "pilgrim" when news of the war had reached him, in Utah Territory. He was going to pick up where he had left off.

"The Watsatches," he said, pleased that Ned's offer hadn't made him ask. There were lots of men who would have thought a crippled comrade would be trying to ride dead-head, so Pete had thought about it, but he had never suggested it. "Close to Great Salt Lake."

THE stove had been Ned's contribution to the partnership.

"You got the savvy and the feel for a proper mine-site," he had said. "You got the knack for building. I'll kick in with the horse and donkey *and* the stove."

And it was as if Ned were trying to help him find a partner, the way that little old pot-belly stove drew men to share, for a time, Pete's hospitality, and to warm to his enthusiasm over traces and veins that showed promise. But the enthusiasm played out in Pete's itinerant partners when the pay-streak played out in the unyielding rock. The partners would go their way—mostly eastward—while Pete broke up camp and went his way—ever westward.

"Seems as if I'm lacking, somehow," Pete had seen it, when he skirted past the fabulous Virginia City mines with gentle envy and, keeping north of the Carson City silver area, made for the Donner Pass region. "Seems as if Ned's stove gets me *men,* but I don't know how to make pardners of them."

Then blond, husky, but discouraged young Jake Granlin had stumbled across the path to Pete's diggings in a snowstorm, and Pete had taken the youth in with a new hope in his heart.

"I saw the smoke from the stove," the grateful giant had explained, when some powerful coffee and pungent bacon had restored the life to his cold body, and stilled his teeth from chattering. "Nice lil' stove you got there, partner."

But Pete's secret elation at this seeming new gift from Ned Meeks—a right-looking young partner—was tempered by mild disappointment when he became aware of a flaw in the youth's make-up.

"Suspicious," Pete saw it. "Always thinking someone is trying to get the better of him. Well, maybe that'll change."

He saw it first in the way—on the second day—that young Jake Granlin looked meaningly at Pete's own portion from the frying-pan when he said, "*That's* good side-meat you got, friend. Not too much fat to it."

And when Cordrey insisted on trading what he had left for what Jake had left, the blond youth blinked his gray eyes sullenly and murmured: "Looks like I ate the poorest part of mine first, whilst you saved the fat part of yours for last."

The boy had all but gone on his way toward Reno City that night. But it was cold out, and Pete had gathered much seasoned spruce to the cabin to make a cheery fire, and after a bit, Jake changed his mind.

Thinking about it later, Pete had excused it. "A man alone must have a flaw, must have something gnawing at him," he thought. "Like I have something wrong with me. My hip. But it ain't a hip is bothering Jake."

Pursuing it further in his mind, he

came to a conclusion:

"I'm no proper pardner myself, which is why I'm alone. Looks as if I've got to make the same allowances for Jake that I expect Jake to make for me. But I got to show him where he is wrong. He can see where I'm wrong."

In the days that followed, Jake Granlin's suspicious and mistrustful streak came into clearer evidence. He had objected to working the modest mine-opening that Cordrey had started, even though it showed a promise of gold among the silver streaks of the workings.

"It ain't I don't appreciate you taking me in," the youth said awkwardly, "nor helping you because of that bad hip. But—well—"

"Say it, son," Pete had invited mildly.

"Well, that's your diggin's. Sure, you *say* we are partners. But it's you has this claim staked out, should I hit a good streak. Now, why don't we work it so I have a claim of my own, a mine of my own to work? Then if I strike it lucky, I'll know I'll get a half of it."

"Reasonable," Cordrey had seen it. "But half as fast as if we work one diggin's."

"And twice the chance of hitting a good streak of ore," Jake had argued. "Right?"

SO THEY'D made a new opening into the mountain, had started to work the one on one day, and the second on the next day. And then Jake had started to range the creeks, while Pete had worked at broad-axing timbers to shore up their diggings as they went into the mountain with the two openings.

Pete Cordrey knew what the lad was about, and he'd done it himself once, so he held his peace and said nothing. Then one day Jake came hurrying back to the cabin with a pouch of nuggets.

"Gold!" he said. "Real gold! And no forever digging to get at it. I panned it up, sluiced the gravel, and—there it is! We been wasting time, Pete!"

Pete said, "You'll still find some, from time to time. But most of the surface gold was grabbed up long since, Jake. Anyway, the real wealth is in ore, not in nuggets which have been washed down from the mountains by Lord knows how many centuries of rains and slides."

That suspicious look came into Jake's eyes again, as it was always coming into Jake's eyes.

"Say! This ain't all mine, is it? Huh?"

Pete blinked. "You mean you jumped a claim? Where?"

"No, nothing like that. But—well, you could say you had grubstaked me, I 'spose, so it looks like I owe you some part of this strike of mine. What's right? A third?"

Pete had killed his smile of pity even as it was born. "A third would be right handsome for you to give me, Jake," he had murmured, the double-meaning of his words lost on the youth.

But when it was measured out on Cordrey's rude scales, Jake had eyed Pete's share with questioning eyes.

"Danged if it don't look like you got the biggest pile!"

"That's 'cause you wanted all them little nuggets that weigh plenty, but don't stack so high as mine," Pete explained.

Jake had transferred a few of the larger nuggets of the modest pile to his own hoard, giving Pete many smaller ones in exchange. "By heck, it still looks like you have more! More than a third portion, I mean. Oh, well—you're my pardner, I won't argue it."

It was when Jake thought of filing on the diggings which he called "my claim" that anything resembling an argument came up.

"I want to go to Reno and file on my claim," he put it. "I'll bring some grub back, too, and some more 'baccy."

"Don't see as how you can file," Pete had demurred. "It is on my land, Jake, and while I don't mind you working it for half-shares, I can't see my way to giving up all legal right."

Jake had thought long about that. "You must think my workings is better than yours?" he suggested, at last, his eyes wary. "Is that it?"

Pete's laugh had been hearty. It was like the bacon and the small find of nuggets in the creek again. Things always looked better to Jake until he had them. Then the other fellow's looked better again.

"Lordy, no," the older man chuckled. "No, Jake, we ain't been far enough in

either of 'em to know. Both show ore-trace, naturally. But what either will assay to the ton of rock, it ain't time to say yet."

Jake wasn't satisfied, however. And when Cordrey showed visible signs of excitement over a widening streak that a powderblast uncovered in Jake's diggings, the youth looked more suspicious than ever.

"Let's work yours to-morrow," he had suggested.

Pete didn't need to wonder why this sudden re-awakened interest in 'his' mine. He knew.

"Jake thinks I got something I'm hiding," he thought. "Thinks I'm putting something past him."

He had got enough of Jake's past history out of the lad's nightly talks around the stove to see without wonder why the younger man was so suspicious of everyone. An orphan early in his boyhood, he had been worked like a beast-of-burden on a relative's farm in Ohio. He had run away to Chicago, and his fight for survival through the ensuing years had shown Jake nothing but the seamy side of life. He would amass a small amount of goods or money, only to lose them through being hoodwinked or forcibly robbed.

Just before he had stumbled across Pete's path, he had been working a small mine near the great Virginia City strike, only to have his 'partner' side in with the owners of rich adjoining claim alongside them when Jake's claim seemed to be panning out.

"Sold out to them," Jake related it bitterly. "Probably they gave him a cut of their own mine to say we had knowingly jumped a part of their claim. Which was a lie, anyway."

"You didn't fight it?" Pete had asked.

"Fight?" Jake's bitter retort had come. "With them others rich enough to buy the gov'ment officials to back 'em up? No! I'm not a fool! I got out while my hide was still intact. A man just can't trust nobody. Speaking of which, why don't we go to Reno and let me file my claim on my diggings?"

"We been over that before this," Pete said wearily. "You plain don't trust me, Jake. You don't trust my judgment, you don't trust my fairness. A proper pardner has to trust in two people. Himself first he must trust. He must know himself, know what he can and can't do. Then he must know and trust his pardner. You don't have confidence in yourself and you sure have none in me."

THE boys's color told the shot had hit home. "Just 'cause I say you got the better claim?" he asked. "Well, I've seen enough to know there ain't much in my diggings. But I'm tired of arguing. I'll pull stakes with dawn to-morrow, Pete. And thanks for the grubstake. Though I must say it looks to me at least even, with me doing all the heavy work for you whilst you hit something in your diggings. What, I don't know, but you did. Oh, well—call me early, will you, Pete? I'll want to be at Reno City by dark."

Pete rolled to the wood-pile on a stiff left hip and freshened up the fire. He made no effort toward quiet, because Jake never rolled out of his blankets until the shack was warm.

Pete unrolled the slim parcel of bacon, scooped some beans up from the nail-keg where he kept them, and went to his box of a cupboard to get the balance of some meal, for biscuits.

He had to move his small pouch of nuggets aside, the nuggets that Jake had gathered in the creeks until he was sure there were no more.

"I'd ought to give them back to him," he thought, wondering how he could do it without offending Jake's pride. "He'll need 'em, poor lad, 'cause he's going to go through life not having anything he can't hold in his grasp. And a man who can't have at least dreams, and trust in some fellow man, usually never has much else."

He grinned when he thought suddenly how he could give at least a share of it to Jake without the youth's feeling he was an object of Pete's pity. He stoked up the fire and went out to his diggings, there to spread the nuggets in a disordered scattering behind a rock which he and Jake had been about to move out where the work animals could drag it on chains.

"Just hope he don't see through my way of doing," the older man murmured and he hurried back through the cold

of the late dawn to the shack. "When it occurs to him, if ever it does, he will be too far away to bother turning back."

But he hoped Ned's old stove would argue Jake out of his intention to leave. His bad hip kept Cordrey from asking favors, but Jake's diggings did look more than a mite good, to Pete's knowing eyes.

"The way that streak is spreading," he mused, "it could widen to something in the next ten feet. Or it could plain peter out to worthless rock."

The aroma of side-meat frying and beans gurgling in a broth of molasses brought Jake up from his bunk. The lad ate with a good appetite, never noticing that Pete ladled his own share of food into the younger man's pan.

Pete was delighted when Jake said, wiping his mouth with the back of a big hand, "I'll help get that big rock out o' your diggings, Pete, afore I pull stakes."

Cordrey worked it to let Jake be at the business-end of the rock while Pete himself stood to start the horse and donkey to pulling the obstacle clear so that the shoring might go on.

The younger man let out a muffled yell from the darker recess where he was working the chain around the rock; then he was silent. When Cordrey started back in alarm, however, fearing something had happened to Jake, the youth called out:

"It's all right, Pete, I just—I just hit my hand onto something. All right, now —haul away!"

Pete was glad when he went back in after the rock had been got clear and saw that the nuggets had been gathered up. But disappointment was heavy on him as an hour passed with Jake packing to leave, and not a word had he spoken yet of his 'find.' By rights, he should have been weighing out Pete's half of the planted nuggets.

"Maybe I'll stay, after all," Jake said suddenly, when he had his knapsack ready and straightened to meet Pete's quiet eyes. "If you'd only see it to declare me in this thing legal-like. I mean, let me file for a claim up to Reno City, instead of just you saying you are my pardner."

"We could claim together," Pete said. "What's wrong with that?"

"I want something of my own!" Jake declared. "Heck, all my life I been having to do on someone else's say-so. I want a claim of my own! But you can have shares in it, should I strike something."

Cordrey was worried. His 'plant' was backfiring on him.

"You would be satisfied to declare only for one diggings? But you would work in both? Like you know, I can't do one alone, Jake."

Jake had a plan all ready for telling. "Here's my idea: we both have our claim, and the other man to work in it on a share. But not equal shares. Say, a fifth. If I hit, you get a fifth. If you hit, I get a fifth."

CORDREY grunted. He thought he could see the way things were going.

"I tell you, yours looks better'n mine, son. If only we could get another ten foot along say, I think you'd see it clear to come full partners with me on everything."

Jake's eyes told Pete he had given him his opening. "Mine is bettern than yours? All right, friend, let's trade. You take the one we opened up as mine, and I'll take yours. And we'll work it like I say. What you hit there, you only give me a fifth of. And same way if I hit in yours."

"Starting to-day?" Pete inquired, his eyes hardening.

"No, to-morrow," Jake suggested. "Half-shares on anything found to-day."

Pete's eyes relented a little. "We'd both have to go to Reno City, then. Well—" Jake had that bad flaw in him. But you had to take a lot of slag and stone to get silver and gold. Jake had some slag and stone in his make-up, that was all. "I'll think about it. I hate to see you pull out, Jake. It ain't as if you had something better to go to."

"I'll promise to work yours equal time with mine, no matter what was hit or wasn't hit," Jake tried desperately to nail down the agreement. "How about it?"

"It appears you won't take my word for things," Cordrey shrugged. "But you want me to take yours."

"On that, I'll shake," Jake offered. "Look, have I ever said, 'Let's shake on that, pardner'? No! But when I shake, I mean it. I'll shake on that, Pete."

"On splitting everything, you mean?"

"No, I mean on working equal time on your diggings, and being satisfied with one-fifth should you hit it big. And same way you work mine equal time, for a fifth part."

"Maybe," Pete said dourly, as he got to his feet, "you would like to do that way about everything? One fifth the grub if I fetch it and cook it, and one fifth the heat of the stove because it is my stove and I fire it, and—"

"Aw, no, Pete, don't talk like that. Furthermore, I'll do my full share after this, if only you do my way this once. I'll be up early, I'll do more cooking, I'll tend that danged pot-belly."

"That pot-belly," Cordrey murmured, "does more than you think it does, youngster. Wel-l, all right, let's have it your way."

Pete attended to his part of filing so that Jake would get a share and then he fetched Jake from the general-store to have Jake declare the one-fifth agreement on 'his' claim.

That attended to, Pete was making a few purchases of personal things before the trip home, when Jake passed him a small sack of cloth and said:

"Half of some nuggets and dust I found is yours, Pete. I know, I know—it could be I only have to give you a fifth, but I said after to-day a fifth, so here is your half."

"Mind my asking where you found them?" Pete inquired.

"'Neath a rock," Jake evaded, as he busied himself looking at some merchandise. "I'm gonna have me a good hoss and new saddle when I hit my claim right."

But Jake held to his word, and worked half his time in what was now Pete's diggings. His humor didn't improve when further work in Jake's own claim failed to yield even much of hope. A streak that looked good petered out in another five feet of excavating.

"Can't understand it," he muttered, over the night's meal.

"What?" Cordrey asked, making his eyes innocent.

"No gold," Jake said, "nor nothing else," he added. "In my diggings."

"I told you I thought mine was better," Cordrey reminded. "I mean, yours that was, but that is mine, now. We'll work a charge of powder into that wall tomorrow, and if it don't yield, maybe we'll move on to other places."

Jake insisted on placing the fuse for the charge, on the argument that if the fuse should burn too rapidly, he would have a better chance of getting clear than Pete, with his bad hip.

"I admit you know more'n me," he said. "On powder-charges, I mean. But you tell me how to do it, and I'll do it that way."

So Pete helped dampen down the fuse to delay it, helped to tamp the charge into the laboriously-drilled holes and retreated to safety, pleased that Jake had unbent that much to take the risk.

The muffled roar of the charge echoed through the mountains and after an interval the dust cleared so that they could dig back in to where the blast had loosed another ten feet of rock. It was close to sundown when Jake trained his lamp on the wall and stood stupefied by what he saw there.

EVEN to Jake's untutored eyes, there was a spreading, a growing trace of hard ore that widened to take up half the wall, and where it disappeared into unblasted rock, it was solid.

"Look!" the younger man husked. "Look, Pete! Gold! Solid gold!"

"Silver," Cordrey corrected. "But there sure is a lot of it! There'll be a new trail cut to the Carson City Refining Plant!"

Jake threw down his shovel and shouldered past Pete, his eyes angry and his mouth bitter. Pete let him go, working on at clearing space for more blasting. In twenty minutes Jake came back.

"I have given my hand on it," he said. "But to think this was mine. All mine! And I gave it up to you!"

"You made me take it," Pete corrected mildly. "I kept saying it looked good. Remember?"

"But what is a man going to believe?" Jake asked wildly. "I got to believe what I see, don't I? It's sure funny how that other diggings showed gold, and this

one shows only silver."

Pete said, "Virginia City is making Fair and Mackey and Flood and others millionaires with both gold *and* silver, son. You found gold in my old diggings, you say? You didn't tell me."

Jake was sad-eyed. "I split it even," he said. "Up to Reno City. Remember my saying I found it under a rock? Wasn't so much of it. Mebbe a little less than I got out of the creeks. But—"

"One-third what came out of your creek workings, Jake," Pete said gently. "Exactly one-third."

Jake stared. "You measured it?"

"No, Jake, you measured it." Then, while Jake stood in the stunning realization of what Cordrey was saying, the older man continued, "I wasn't trying to trick you, Jake. I wanted you to have something more'n you had when you left. Me, I have my hands and my brain and my heart and my trust in things. You didn't have but your pitiful amount of gold and your everlasting suspicion of people. So I set it around for you to find, so you'd have anyways half of it to go away with."

Jake nodded, his eyes building up what he should have known long ago.

"I thought it was funny I should be finding nuggets in a cave where there was no water-trace," he said dully. "But I wouldn't let myself believe it. I didn't want to believe it! So . . ." He let it go there, and gathered his tools. Night was falling. "So I'm licked!"

CORDREY didn't start to worry until that night. Jake sat somberly, his eyes full of many things, and none of them were pretty to Pete's discerning gaze. When he got ready for bed, Jake was still sitting in the crude chair, his eyes savage and his face pale.

Pete had tried to wait Jake out, planning to sleep with his single-action beneath his pillow-sack of straw and burlap. But Jake, usually abed early, was still sitting with savage eyes and twisted lips when Pete got under his blankets.

He was still awake when Jake went to bed and Pete sneaked his gun over then, not answering when Jake sat up with a snapped, "That you, Pete?"

He waited for the dawn, forcing himself to keep his eyes open and on the long shadow that was Jake's still, but unsleeping, body. Men had been killed ruthlessly for much less than a portion of the precious metal in Pete's claim.

He stayed awake grimly and determinedly. At the first noise that would tell of Jake's coming over toward him, Pete would fire. Maybe not to kill, if he could help it. But he would fire. . . .

He became aware of a noise and realized he had slept. He came up in his blankets with a gasp of alarm, his hand clutching the gun.

Then he held it still and unbelieving, his eyes on the other man in the shack.

Jake was up and dressed, and the fire was roaring in the pot-belly, and bacon was frying in the pan. Even now, Jake was facing him, having straightened from depositing a load of new-cut wood on the floor. "Thought you were dead," the younger man said mildly, his face sober but his eyes philosophical.

"Thought I was, too," Cordrey echoed. "Well, blow me down if you ain't a better cook than me! Man, that bacon smells good! And the shack so warm and cozy!" He squinted owlishly at Jake. "Sure you ain't just working me to get me to change the way my claim reads as to shares?"

Jake shook his head. "Nope. I thought about that through the night. I even thought about killing you, I was so mad. I have given my hand and my word, and I'm not asking you to change anything."

Pete yawned. "That's good, because I wouldn't allow no man more'n half what he tried to throw away. Besides, riding to Reno again when we got so much to do would sure be a waste of time."

"A half?" Jake stared, taking his eyes from the bacon. "A fifth, I was to get."

"You didn't see my agreement, because the agent witnessed it before you come in. All concerned you was that 'gold mine' you thought you had. I don't partner anybody less it is fifty-fifty. Say, watch that bacon you nitwit! You trying to burn it or cook it?"

Jake grinned suddenly, such a grin as Pete had never seen on his face, nor few others. It was the sort of grin Ned Meeks had given him, in those old dead days. He saved the bacon.

"Reckon you know best," he murmured. "Partner."

A COW COUNTRY NOVEL

by JACKSON GREGORY

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THE MAN

WHEN "Hard" Ross was mad his rage flared like fire. The men who went to him as their foreman for orders and pay and in whose hands the destinies of the Up and Down cattle ranch resided were not afraid of him. They were not the sort of men to be afraid of anything. But they had a way, at times like this, of going quietly about their business.

"Do about it!" bellowed Hard Ross at the half dozen quiet men in the bunkhouse. "What am I going to do about it, huh? The law, you say, Harper? Yes, the law! The law that men have gone

Dudelike Jim Sherrod buys a rangeful of trouble, but his fancy duds don't stop him when there's a nest of thieving rustlers to clean up!

"Look out!" Madden shouted. "Sherrod's on the bridge!" (CHAP. IX)

FROM PAINTED ROCK

to ever since Adam, long before the time of crooked sheriffs and rotten judges! The old law, the law there ain't no bribin' and buyin' up, the law of a man's right hand!"

It was a long speech for Hard Ross to make, and the men looked at him curiously. Even "Sunny" Harper, whose tousled yellow hair and eternal grin gave him his name, condescended to be serious.

"What's happened recent?" he asked. "Everything was all right when we hit the hay last night."

"You mean we thought it was!" cried Hard Ross. "But it wasn't all right any more'n it's been off and on for a year now. Only this time I got something I can put my hands on! Silver Slippers is gone!"

"Silver Slippers?" queried "Little John" Sperry, his voice an incredulous gasp. "Why, I tied her in her stall last night, Ross. I watered her and fed her the last thing."

"And she's clean gone this mornin'," snapped Hard Ross. "Stole the same as a lot of other things has been stole

in less'n a year!" He shook his head.

They sat still, all but Hard Ross who stood at the open door, and the cook remained by his stove. Then another man came in, a big fellow with round, muscular shoulders and smoldering eyes.

He glanced carelessly about the long, low room, saw Hard Ross and started back. But his leap, sideward and back, was not quick enough. Hard Ross' big hands had flashed outward, they had settled upon the other man's shoulders, they had jerked him off his feet and into the room, and slammed him back so that his shoulders struck heavily against the wall.

"Hawley," said the foreman, his eyes alight with rage, "I'm goin' to give you the beatin' of your life!"

"What's the matter?" cried Hawley. "What's eatin' you, Ross? Just because you happen to be boss here you ain't goin'—"

Hard Ross drove his right hand straight into Hawley's face. The man's head snapped back, striking the wall. He swayed a moment, all but stunned, then his hand flew to his hip pocket.

"You—fool!" he choked. "I'll kill you for that!"

But Hard Ross was not a fool. He leaped forward, struck again before Hawley's hand could go the little journey to his bulging hip pocket. Hawley fell heavily, and he lay still.

Ross stooped, jerked the revolver from Hawley's pocket and flung it under one of the bunks.

"Give him some water, cookie," he said. "Out'n the bucket."

BUT it was Sunny Harper who brought cold water and splashed it over the unconscious man's face and wrists. Hawley opened his eyes, wiped the blood from his face and sat up.

"What's the next play?" he asked rather coolly. "Or now maybe you're goin' to tell me what you done that for."

"No, I ain't, seein' as you know as well as I do! But I'm goin' to tell the other boys and there ain't no objection to you listenin'. You boys know how I put this Hawley on the pay roll more'n a month ago. You know we didn't need an extra man real bad, and you wondered why I done it, I reckon. I put him on because I had a hunch he was a crook, that's why! I'd had my eye on him. And there's another man we've all got our eyes on quite a spell—Bull Plummer of the Bar Diamond outfit. I'd seen this man Hawley with Plummer, last time there was races in town, and when he showed up for a job I was sure Plummer was back of it, and that means something crooked. So I put him on and watched him.

"Durin' the last two months there ain't been any cattle lost, but I figgered he was just gettin' solid with us. And last night, I heard him come into the bunkhouse about two o'clock, and I hadn't heard him go out. It's plain as print to me that he's the gent who stole the finest blooded little mare as ever was foaled this side the Rockies. And a man as lays a hand on Silver Slippers gets what Hawley just got."

Hawley, sneering, drew himself up.

"What do you think I done with her?" he demanded. "I went to get a drink and was gone about ten minutes. Think I et her?"

"I don't know what you done with her," Ross replied. "She's gone. I reckon you put up the job with Plummer and he rode over or sent one of his yellow crew to take her off your hands."

The smile which came to Hawley's cut lips was not pretty. "You're sure great at guessin'," he said slowly. "Only you're quite some ways off. And as for proof—"

"Proof!" snorted Ross. "Do you take me for the sort of man that's goin' to wait for proof? I know you're a cussed crook and had a hand in the takin' of Silver Slippers, just as you've had a hand in a whole lot of Bull Plummer's rotten play. Hawley, you listen to this: Do you know why I just beat you up a little instead of killin' you outright as you deserve?"

"I ain't curious," muttered Hawley.

"Well, maybe the rest of the boys got

a right to know why I'm bein' so gentle with you." His deep voice grew husky with emotion.

"I reckon there's just one thing in the world as counts. And it's love! Now wait a minute"—he spoke with sudden fierceness—"until I finish what I've begun, or I'll have to beat somebody else up this mornin'. It's love I'm sayin' and that's what I'm meanin'. There's diff-'rent kinds of love. I ain't ever loved a

JIM SHERROD

woman and I ain't goin' to. I ain't ever been mad in love with whisky nor with poker. But Silver Slippers! I raised her from a filly, and I broke her, and no man but me has ever slapped a leg across her back. Now you know what I mean?"

For a brief, uncertain moment the man's hard eyes were unbelievably soft. Then, suddenly swinging about upon Hawley, Hard Ross cried harshly:

"Why didn't I pound the last spark of life out'n you? Why? Because I want that little mare back! Because you're the one man who can go get her for me. And I'm passin' it to you straight, Hawley. If you waste any time puttin' Silver Slippers back there in the barn, without a scratch on the silk of her hide, so help me, I'm goin' to kill you!"

Hawley, his face dead-white save for the scarlet threads of blood across it, turned and went down to the corral for his horse. . . .

THE law and barbed-wire fences had not yet invaded the mountain valleys in the Up and Down country. Sheriffs were not unheard of but the district was big and wild and eminently self-dependent, and men had not forgotten the world-old ways of settling their own troubles. And the Up and Down had been having its troubles for upward of a year now. Trouble upon the range is apt to mean just one thing—the loss of cattle. And, where fences and law have not come, the loss is likely explained by the one word, "Rustlers."

The Up and Down range had its natural boundaries, defined since Time was young. There was the valley, twenty miles in length, so narrow here and there that a cowboy riding upon one edge under the cliffs might pick off with his Winchester a deer browsing upon the far side, bulging in places to a width of half a dozen miles. It was the Valley of the Twin Lakes. At the "Upper End" the creek which carried away the surplus of the two little lakes' clear water to wander westward through the valley had its beginning under tall sheer cliffs in a white froth over echoing waterfalls. For a man to climb the cliffs there on foot was a day's work; for him to climb them on horseback was an impossibility. There was one of the range's Nature-made fences.

Upon the two sides of the valley, the steep mountains stood in roughly parallel lines almost to the "Lower End," twenty miles away. There were narrow passes, through which it was possible for cattle to work their way out and up, across the uplands and so over into a neighboring range. But there were men whose allotted duty it was to visit these gorges daily, to see that no restless steers were seeking to leave the home range.

And still, all during the year cattle had been lost. A dozen big steers had gone in one herd. Hard Ross knew they hadn't gone through the little passes, but that was all he did know. Except that they were gone—eight hundred dollars gone in a night. And again and again a steer, or three or four beef cattle, "turned up missin'."

That it was "Bull" Plummer's work, Hard Ross was growing more and more positive. Plummer's Bar Diamond outfit lay paralleling the Up and Down just across the ridge to the west. If once Plummer and his hard crew could get the cattle across the ridge the rest would be simple. From the Bar Diamond it was only a night's drive to the railroad.

Under such conditions, it was not remarkable that on the morning Hard Ross lost a mare five hundred dollars could not have bought, he also lost his temper and bruised his fist on the face of Hawley, whom he suspected.

"Anyway," muttered Ross as he watched the men going down to the corrals for their horses, "I don't have to report this horse stealin' to the Old Man down in the city. It's my loss this time, not his."

Then it was that he saw a stranger approaching the Up and Down ranchhouse.

He was an odd sort of stranger, his way of coming more strange still. The road into the valley from the nearest town, White Rock, thirty miles away, was as poor a road as a man ever strove manfully to engineer a Studebaker wagon along. Yet, coming up over a knoll in the floor of the valley, was a big red trap of the jaunting car type. The propelling power was a team of mules; the vehicle rocked and jolted along behind a heavy log chain; a man riding on horseback at the side of the mules handled the reins and the necessary flow of language; and the stranger sat smiling upon the high seat of the trap and gazing with mild eyes upon the landscape through pince-nez.

"City feller comin' campin'," grunted Hard Ross. "He'll be shootin' at deer and killin' my cattle."

Then the mules came down the knoll at a swinging trot; the driver jerked them to a standstill in front of the bunkhouse, and the man on the high seat smiled pleasantly upon Hard Ross and wished him an amiable good morning. The boys at the corrals saddled swiftly and rode back to gaze at the curiosity.

The stranger smiled upon them all and climbed down. He had all the earmarks of a "city feller" all right. He wore a derby hat, patent leather shoes, a neatly tailored gray suit, and tan gloves. A fishing-rod, newly bought in White Rock, thrust its way upward like a mast; a rifle in brand new case leaned against the seat, and there were suit cases and traveling bags innumerable.

SUCH things the cowboys saw before they saw the man himself, and then the man under the clothes. He had looked insignificant, but now it appeared that he was a tall, rangy young fellow. However, the hand that now came out of its tan glove was soft and white. There was a smudge of ink upon the thumb and forefinger which Ross saw, and grunted.

His mild brown eyes ranged from Hard Ross to the rest of the boys.

"Which one of you men is Mr. Ross?" he asked.

"I am," answered Ross. "What do you want?"

The young man offered his hand and his name together.

"I'm Mr. Sherrod." He smiled. "I've brought you a letter from Mr. Hodges." He felt in his pockets, seemed alarmed, muttered, "I'm afraid I've lost it!" Then his beaming smile came back. "No, here it is."

He handed it to the foreman. Hard Ross read:

Dear Ross:

This will inform you that I have sold the Up and Down, brand and all, to Mr. Sherrod to whom this will introduce you.

D. M. Hodges.

Hard Ross' comment was brief, characteristic.

"Well, I'll be—"

Young Mr. Sherrod adjusted his glasses and beamed.

"Something of a surprise, eh? Well, so it is to me, my good fellow. But I had a pile of money and I was tired of the

usual thing, you know, so I thought I'd have a try at it. Say, it's great out here, isn't it? I'm going to have the time of my life. I say, Ross, give this other fellow a hand with my traps. I dare say the cook's got some coffee and biscuits and eggs? I'll run in and have a mouthful." He beamed over his shoulder, as he turned to the cookhouse door. "You men wait until I come out. You take your orders from me, you know."

For a moment there was silence as Mr. Sherrod disappeared in search of breakfast. Then, simultaneously, there came a stifled curse from Hard Ross and a burst of laughter, of pure glee, from the men on their horses.

Evidently Mr. Sherrod was hungry, for it was close to half an hour before he came out, carefully lighting a cigar and evidently in a contented frame of mind. Then he saw his luggage still where he had left it, and turned, frowning, to Ross.

"I say," he called sharply, "I said you were to take those things into the house for me. Didn't you hear me?"

"Sure I heard you," was Ross' surly answer. "I been holdin' down my job quite some time as puncher first and foreman next, but I'm eternally blowed if I ever agreed to stand around like a boot-lickin' valet. If you want that truck moved I reckon you'd best move it yourself."

There was a note of finality in Hard Ross' tone. With the spirit of revolt high in him now, he was not in the mood to take any orders.

Mr. Sherrod adjusted his glasses and stared.

"You mean," he said slowly, "that you refuse to do what I tell you to do? Well, you understand that this ranch is mine. If my servants won't do what I tell them—"

"Servants!" boomed Hard Ross, his big hands twitching. "Servants, you little hop-o'-my-thumb! You say that to me again and I'll slap your face for you!"

The new owner of the Up and Down gasped. "You—you impudent boor! I —I . . . If you so much as laid a hand on me I'd have you arrested and sent up for

Sherrod lifted the foreman in his arms (CHAP. IV)

six months! I've a notion to have you arrested anyway. Mr. Hodges has told me how his cattle, my cattle now, have been stolen, and you haven't—"

"Hold on!" shouted Hard Ross angrily. "You go easy, little cock-of-the-walk. You just hint I ain't straight, and I'll break you plumb in two."

"I believe you're what you look like," fumed Mr. Sherrod. "You act like a cattle-thief, you look like—"

Hard Ross' open palm smote Sherrod's freshly shaven cheek and the new owner of the Up and Down measured the length of his immaculate suit upon the dust by the bunkhouse door.

"You little weak-eyed rabbit!" choked Ross as he stood over the prone form. "You get up and you apologize, or I'll slap the white face clean off'n you."

MR. SHERROD made no attempt to get to his feet. He moved a little, found the glasses at his side, held them up to his nose and stared up into the angry flushed face above him.

"I say, Ross," he complained querulously, "this is no way to cut up, you know. I—well, I was a trifle angry, I suppose. No doubt you are honest enough."

Ross turned his back squarely upon the owner of the Up and Down.

"You boys don't take any more orders off'n me," he said quietly. "It's up to you and this city gazabo."

He stroke into the bunkhouse, slamming the door after him.

Mr. Sherrod got slowly to his feet, dusting off his trousers.

"I call you men to witness that the assault was unprovoked," he said sharply to the chuckling cowhands. "Do whatever that man had told you to do for the day. I'll give you your orders tomorrow."

They went, in a whirl of dust and gleeful laughter. Mr. Sherrod took a step toward the bunkhouse door, stopped, rubbed his chin reflectively, then threw the door open.

"You're going to quit?" he demanded.

"No," snapped Ross. "I've already quit."

"Is it necessary," Sherrod said hesitatingly, "for you to go this way, without any warning? Come now, Ross, be a good fellow! I want you to stay awhile and sort of look after things until I can get my hand in. No doubt the work here is simple enough, but a man can't pitch right in, his first day on a cow ranch and run it. Come now, Ross. I made a mistake. Let's forget it."

Hard Ross went to a bunk and sat down.

"I don't quite get you, stranger," he said heavily. "I just knocked you as flat as a doormat, and now you're askin' me to forget and stick on the job? Just what are you givin' me?"

"I'm giving you seventy-five dollars a month and board and room," the new owner answered quickly. "And I want you to run this thing for me until I can get the swing of it. It may take me a month, perhaps more."

"A month!" gasped Hard Ross, and forgot the cigarette he had started to roll.

But he was thinking. Jobs were not plentiful. Then there was Bull Plummer still to settle with, and Hawley and Silver Slippers. It galled him to keep his place under a man like Sherrod. And yet—

"It's your ranch, Mr. Sherrod." He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "If you want me to stay, why I'll stay."

II

THEN it's settled." Mr. Sherrod came on into the bunkhouse. He found a chair, disposed his tall frame in it languidly and lighted a new cigar.

"I want a word or two with you before the day's work begins," he said surveying Hard Ross through the upcurling smoke.

"Fire ahead," muttered Ross.

"I've brought a ranchman's outfit along with me," said Mr. Sherrod with dignity. "I want you to look over my things and pass on them. Will you do it?"

Ross grumbled out a curt, "Sure." Mr. Sherrod seemed upon the point of giving an order, but instead rose swiftly, went out to his pile of baggage and lugged a black bag into the bunkhouse. What he took from it caused Hard Ross to gasp with astonished amusement.

There were all the "trimmings" of a

theatrical cowpuncher. A brand-new Stetson with two feet of soft brim, a scarlet neckscarf, a bright blue silk shirt, a pair of black boots with exaggeratedly high heels, spotlessly white chaps, a bridle with Spanish bit, and a broad cartridge belt with two heavy-caliber Colt revolvers swinging from it. The cook, on the verge of stifling, went hurriedly outside for a bucket of water.

"Are they all right?" queried Mr. Sherrod. "I haven't forgotten anything, have I?" He spoke anxiously.

"You haven't missed a bet," said Hard Ross fervently.

Mr. Sherrod smiled upon his foreman with returning amiability.

"I'm going to show you that I mean business," he said. Divesting himself of his outer clothing, he began to don his cowboy costume. "I'm going out to ride over the ranch with you this morning." He jerked on his snow-white chaps, and buckled his belt about his waist. "Is there an extra saddle-animal on the ranch that a man can trust? That won't go to bucking, you know."

Hard Ross had been tempted to give this man the worst horse of the outfit. Now he felt ashamed of himself.

"The pore devil's tryin' to be a man," he told himself.

"There's just one more thing." Mr. Sherrod paused. "I guess I did make a mistake this morning, Ross. Will you —do you ever drink anything?"

"I ain't ever missed the chance." Ross grinned.

Mr. Sherrod went back to his luggage. He brought back a large suitcase this time. From it came a bottle. There was scarcely a flicker of surprise in Hard Ross' eyes when he saw that what he was called up to drink to a better understanding, was champagne. The bottle popped and they drank from two thick coffee cups.

"You haven't got any whisky along, have you?" Ross asked a little apologetically. "Just to wash the taste out with?"

They had whisky together. Then they went down to the corral, Mr. Sherrod in glittering new spurs, boots, chaps and nose glasses. When the proper horses were lassoed by the unerring rope of Ross, a gentle old mare for the new owner, an untamed four-year-old for the foreman, they rode away together across the rolling floor of the valley. And when, an hour later, they met a couple of the boys cutting out a herd of calves at the north corrals, Hard Ross, being a gentleman at heart, gave no sign of having seen the drooping eyelids or the keen delight on faces at the spectacular appearance of Mr. Sherrod, owner of the Up and Down cattle outfit. . . .

Within two days from the time of the coming of the new owner to the Up and Down, word of the event had gone its thirty-mile way to White Rock and from the bustling outpost upon the skirts of the civilized had spread gradually over the lower valley country. But the most delicate morsel upon the tongue of gossip was the characterization of Sherrod himself.

It traveled across the South Ridge and dropped down into the corrals of Bull Plummer. And Bull Plummer got busy.

During the two weeks Mr. Sherrod had been with his Up and Down outfit he had had many adventures. He had not had his head kicked off by a vicious horse in the corrals. But he had fired one of his heavy revolvers at a coyote to the boundless glee of the two men who happened to be with him — Sunny Harper and "Mute" Adams. The coyote, having cocked a knowing eye at the bark chipped from a cedar some twenty or thirty feet above his head, had casually moved on into the chaparral.

"I—I'm afraid I'm out of practice," sighed the marksman, "I'll have to put in a little time shooting at a target."

THAT evening while Mr. Sherrod was painstakingly drilling little holes in the atmosphere around the ace of spades tacked to a young pine tree Bull Plumber, owner of the Bar Diamond, and his own foreman rode up to the Up and Down.

It was too early for the men to have come in from work. Only the owner, Sunny Harper and Cookie were in camp.

Sunny Harper, manfully doctoring a cold with ample potations of whisky from a bottle which Mr. Sherrod had "saved out," saw the big squat form rise up above a knoll. He stared, rubbed

his eyes, then sharply cried out to Sherrod:

"It's Bull Plummer! Now what in blue blazes do you reckon he's lookin' for?"

Sherrod did not seem to have seen or heard so intent was he upon his revolver practice. Then what happened made Sunny Harper choke his whisky. Sherrod, having missed his mark about three feet, squinted, set his teeth and took long aim. Harper noted that Sherrod had moved half a dozen quick steps to the right. The change of base brought the wavering muzzle of the big revolver to bear in the general direction of the man from the Bar Diamond.

"Hey there, Mr. Sherrod!" yelled the suddenly galvanized Sunny. "There comes Plummer! Look out!"

Sunny sat back weakly. The revolver had spat flame and its leaden missile, missing the tree more widely than its predecessors had torn a great hole in the peaked crown of Plummer's hat. It had carried the hat away and with it a lock of Plummer's black hair.

The Bar Diamond owner ducked wildly as a second bullet winged its way by his ear and announced his presence with a mighty shout. Sherrod, before he advanced, turned for an instant to Harper.

"Plummer you said it was, didn't you?" he asked softly.

"It sure is," grunted Sunny. "And it makes me seasick thinkin' what chances I've took watchin' you shoot!"

Then Sherrod went to meet Plummer, but not before Sunny Harper had seen his left eyelid flutter downward behind his glasses in an unquestionable wink! Slowly Sunny put down his bottle, shaking his head.

Plummer, coming on swiftly, reined his horse about, leaned outward and downward from the saddle and swept up his hat from the ground with an angry jerk. His face red, he rode up to Sherrod.

"What do you mean by this?" he snapped viciously.

"I say," Sherrod laughed. "I came pretty near getting you that shot, didn't I?"

"You sure did," growled Plummer. "If you're lookin' for trouble—"

"Mercy!" cried Sherrod, shoving his gun back into its holster. "Don't you see? My target there—I was practicing. You came up unexpectedly"

"You're Sherrod, I take it?" grunted Plummer.

"Yes. You wanted to see me?"

He wiped his forehead, polished his glasses and turned his eyes speculatively upon the Bar Diamond man. What they saw was a heavy-set man on a beautiful horse. The saddle animal was young, black spirited, groomed like a race horse, and legged like a greyhound. The man was bigger than Hard Ross, thicker of neck, of arm, of thigh, of body. The bared throat was hairy, and the large mouth had a heavy, slightly protruding lower lip. His eyes, intent on Sherrod, were keen, measuring.

"You see," Sherrod said pleasantly, "in shooting as in anything else practice makes perfect. I've come here to stay, and a man living in this corner of the world ought to be a good shot, oughtn't he?"

Plummer nodded briefly. His scrutiny missed nothing of the conspicuous revolvers, the white chaps, or the untouched ace of spades tacked to the tree.

"I'm Plummer, from the Bar Diamond," he explained. "Seein' as we're neighbors I thought I'd drop over and say 'Howdy.'"

"Glad you've come," cried Sherrod heartily. "Get down, Mr. Plummer."

PLUMMER slipped out of the saddle and tossed the horse's reins to the ground.

"Yes," he repeated, looking straight and deep into Sherrod's unwavering eyes, "seein' we're neighbors we ought to know each other. Besides, I wanted to talk business with you."

Sherrod nodded. "Suppose we go into my tent, Mr. Plummer. The boys are coming in from work, and we'll have more privacy."

A quick smile on Plummer's heavy lips told that he understood that his host realized he would not be a welcome guest when Hard Ross and the others arrived. He shrugged and followed Sherrod to a little tent pitched under a tree a hundred yards from the bunkhouse. It was Sherrod's home until he could build a ranchhouse. With only an absentee owner

there had never been any need for a ranchhouse before.

Just what passed that evening between the two men in the tent the boys in the bunkhouse could not know. But that the owner of the Up and Down and the owner of the Bar Diamond talked long and earnestly was enough to drive Hard Ross into a fury. To his way of thinking Bull Plummer was crookeder even than his reputation.

"Sherrod ought to know it, too," he snarled over the meal which he did not know that he was eating. "If he'd take a pot-shot at the low-down cattle thief with one of them young cannon of his, even if he missed him a mile and shot his own foot off, I'd think the better of him."

Sherrod had come for something to eat for his guest and himself, had carried it to the tent, saying apologetically that they could talk better out there alone. And as they talked Bull Plummer's heavy voice grew always lower so that no intelligible word reached the bunkhouse. As Plummer's tones sank Sherrod's rose. Now and then he laughed.

Jim Sherrod dropped to his knee and drew (CHAP. X)

"The four-eyed fool's gettin' drunk," Sunny Harper muttered disgustedly.

"Plummer ain't above stealin' his stick-pin with the sparkler in it," growled Hard Ross. "And I hope he does. *Sh!* What's that?"

From the tent came the unmistakable click, click, of poker chips.

"Gettin' drunk and playin' poker with

Bull Plummer," grunted Little John. "One guess to figger out what's goin' to happen."

"Same as a two-weeks-old calf playin' tag with a mountain wolf," offered a cowboy called "Needless".

Before long the musical clink of gold and silver added its account of what was happening. It grew late and the game went on. "Happy Day" Tennant yawned, stretched, and went to bed. One by one the others followed him. At last Hard Ross sat on the doorstep, his thoughts full of a mare named Silver Slippers.

"Bull Plummer knows just where Silver Slippers is right now," he muttered heavily. "He knows where more'n one longhorn wearin' a U and D in its hide has gone the last year. He knows I know it! And he's got the nerve to show up here! Now, what did he come for? What's his play?"

Plummer wasn't in the habit of riding ten miles of hard trail just to pay a social call.

The hours slipped by, the click of chips and jingle of coins continued. It was on the edge of midnight when Sherrod threw back the flap of the tent.

Ross, in the shadows of the bunkhouse, did not move. He watched the two men as they moved away toward the horse which Plummer had left to wait for him during his stay without grain or water. He saw that Plummer walked steadily while Sherrod lurched a little, and guessed that Sherrod had drunk the most.

He heard a brief conversation and as Plummer swung up into the saddle, heard Sherrod agree to ride over to the Bar Diamond for another game. The big man rode away, and Sherrod walked unsteadily back toward the tent. Ross, springing to his feet, went to him with long strides.

"He skinned you nice and plenty, I reckon," snorted the foreman. "Huh?"

Sherrod smiled.

"Come on inside the tent, Ross," he replied. "Want to tell you about it."

WITHIN the tent Sherrod threw himself upon a cot.

"Great chap, Plummer," he remarked absently. "Plays fine hand of cards. And Ross, I'm no baby when it comes to the good old game. I'm going over to his home. We're going to play some more. Better come along, Ross."

"How much did he skin you out of?" snapped Ross, losing patience.

"Oh!" Sherrod laughed unevenly. "Why, let me see."

He sat up, adjusted the nose-glasses, and ran his fingers into his vest pockets. Then he stood on his feet and put his hands into his trousers pockets, swaying. The smile gradually broadened.

"Say, Ross, don't tell the boys," he chuckled. "He played the greatest run of luck you ever saw. He's the luckiest man dealing I ever saw. Yes, sir." His laugh made Ross' hands clench. "Every time he'd deal me a hand I thought my luck had changed, the hand was so good. And then his would be better and he'd win! Talk about a man's lucky night!"

"How much did he win?" thundered Ross.

"Why," hazarded Sherrod still smiling. "About five hundred, I'd say. He — "

But Hard Ross had swept back the tent flap and was running toward the stable.

"What's the matter?" Sherrod called after him. "Where are you going, Ross?"

"I'm goin' for a little ride," Ross' angry voice boomed back. "And you better go to bed and put your pants under your pillow, so some jasper don't come and skin you out'n them."

Hours later, Sherrod awoke with a start. It was dark in the tent until the quick flare of a match, and a lighted lantern revealed that Hard Ross had returned from his ride.

"Here's your money," said the foreman bluntly, towering over the bed. He drew from his pocket a handful of gold and silver and dropped it upon the little table. "You might count it out to see if I lost any."

"What!" cried Sherrod incredulously. "You mean that that is why you rode after Plummer? You held him up!"

"I stuck him up just as pretty as if I'd been a highwayman for ten years," Ross growled shortly. "Now I'm goin' to bed. But first I'm goin' to tell you somethin', Mr. Sherrod. It's just this: I ain't ever saw a growed-up man that was a greener tenderfoot than you in all my days and I don't expect to live

long enough to see you beat. But that ain't worryin' me. If you want to let a crook come and skin you out'n your pile on a string of raw deals — "

"You don't mean to insinuate," cut in Sherrod, "that Plummer cheated?"

"No," Ross said drily. "I ain't got a word like insinuate in my head where my tongue reaches for it. I'm just sayin' he's as high up in the order of thievin' crooks as you are in the club of fool tenderfeet. All the same, not carin' whether you buy aigs with your money and let a yaller dog suck the aigs, I go out and makes Mr. Bull Plummer look into the open end of a little forty-four and bring back your counters to you. And I don't want to be misunderstood none. I want you to know why I done a play like that!"

"I'm certainly anxious to know," remarked Sherrod stiffly.

"And I'm tellin' you, ain't I? We been losin' considerable stock from the Up and Down off and on for quite a spell. That stock's been stole from right under my nose. On top of that a couple of weeks ago Silver Slipper, the finest little mare you ever seen, gets stole out'n the barn right down there.

"Now, I ain't a mind-reader maybe, but I ain't exactly what you'd call a blind man, either. I know the crook back of the whole deal. And do I look like a man as is goin' to let that same crook come right square into camp and stick the owner of the Up and Down for five hundred and then get away with it, laughin' at *me* all the time?" Ross' fists were doubled, his eyes threatening. "He didn't laugh none when I overtook him on the trail and had my little talk with him!"

"But man alive!" cried Sherrod. "You don't mean that you suspect Plummer of being a cattle thief? Why, he's a rancher like me. He told me tonight that he's been losing stock, too. He even suggested that we get together and formulate some scheme of apprehending the rustler. That is the business he came over on!"

"And you swallered that?" demanded Ross.

"Let me tell you something, my friend," said Sherrod impatiently. "As soon as it is morning I'm going to ride over to the Bar Diamond. I am going to take this money back to Mr. Plummer, and apologize to him for your conduct of tonight. And then—"

"It don't make no manner of difference to me what you do," cut in Ross angrily. "I'm goin' to bed." He turned on his heel and went out.

Sherrod grinned. "I'd like to know just what was said on the trail," he thought, and chuckled. "Good old Ross!"

III

THE boys had already gone about their work the next morning when Sherrod ate his breakfast. Then he prepared for his ride, for the returning of a call and five hundred dollars poker money.

It was a wonderful morning and Sherrod, as he rode his gentle horse through the valley, sang little snatches of song. He had before him some five miles before he came to the Upper End where the steep cliffs closed in about the Twin Lakes, another five miles or so to ride through the pass, over the south ridge and to the Bar Diamond headquarters. He ambled along until he reached the Narrows, then touching his horse with the spur, broke into a gallop. He noticed how the cliffs rose almost perpendicularly along the boundary lines of the range.

"Lots of fence was saved when this valley was made," he meditated as he rode into the Gap.

Here the cliffs were not five hundred yards apart, and the trail became suddenly steep and difficult, at times so narrow that the rider's leg scraped against the rocks.

Finally, through a sudden opening, he came upon a level, tree-studded plateau, and then all unheralded, the bright beauty of Twin Lakes. One of them was half a mile long, the other a very little less, and in the placid surface of each, pines and cedars were mirrored. The two lakes were like great, glorious jewels in a setting of emerald.

"It's worth all that the place cost me," he ruminated, reining in his horse.

After a time he rode on along a narrow, grass-grown trail, and once more drew rein to look, this time upon a little rocky knoll. For close to a quarter of an

hour he sat still. His eyes, keen and frowning, traveled back and forth along the base of the cliffs, seeming to be seeking something. This was the first time he had come to this end of his holdings, and perhaps he was looking for the trail which led from here through a pass and into Bar Diamond range.

His eyes were still seeking when he rode on. The trail led him to the Upper Lake. He paused, looking at a tiny island which seemed to be afloat upon the middle of the water's quiet surface, and from the miniature isle it was logical that his eyes should wander across the upper lake to the far side and scale the beetling cliffs.

They settled at last on a cabin of squared logs, set close in to the granite wall behind it so that the cliff really made the rear wall of the little dugout. For scarcely more than dugout was it, a poor enough shack covering a square of ground ten feet across from side to side.

"A camp for the boys when they have to spend a night up at this end," guessed Sherrod.

At first he saw no way to get to the cabin across the lake. And then he saw that the trail led from where he was around the further shore and to the cabin door. And he saw, too, not a hundred yards from the cabin, where the pass he sought led through a narrow canyon and to the Bar Diamond outfit. He saw something else—something that made him catch his breath in astonishment.

It was between the mouth of the Pass and the cabin. It was little over a couple of hundred of yards from him when first he saw it and he wondered why he had not seen it before. And then he understood.

Had the thing been in the heart of a city it could have been distinguished a mile away. Here, in the heart of the wild, he had almost stumbled upon it without seeing it. That was because it was constructed so that it was a part of the landscape. Its pillars were the shaggy boles of giant trees, the rough bark and green moss still upon them. Its walls were of the same unplaned timbers, or of the native granite boulders like those strewing the slopes. One corner column was a living cedar whose green boughs stirred gently in a breeze. Another corner was a shoulder of the granite cliffs. It seemed some dryad home, but, in reality it was the abode of man, man-made.

"The man who dreamed that thing," muttered the surprised Sherrod, "was an artist. There should be woodland nymphs in a place like this. That is where their queen should have her throne-room."

To appreciate each little detail held him motionless in the saddle, staring.

A WINDOW looked out through the branches of a gnarled cedar, vine-framed. What appeared but a spire of rock was a deep-throated chimney giving exit to a thin wisp of blue smoke. What appeared a chance fallen log was a foot-bridge spanning one of the streams which slipped down into the lake. He wondered if the stream came from within the strange sylvan house.

The clear, laughing water flashing into the sunlight spoke to his fancy of a Nature-made fountain in some spacious courtyard carpeted with wild flowers. Now, more than ever, was there need for the queen of these solitudes.

And then his questing eyes found *her!*

Beside the stream upon which his admiring eyes had rested there was a great granite block. Two fir trees grew close together upon one side of it, and in their shade gracefully idle as she lay upon a great brown bearskin, watching him with amused eyes, was the girl!

"Good morning," said Sherrod quietly, lifting his hat with a flourish as he spurred his horse close up to the granite block. "Good morning — provided that be the proper salutation."

"Why in doubt as to the time of the day, Sir Stranger?" She laughed.

She was dressed in something dove-colored, to match the soft gray of her eyes. On the brown of her hair the sun had scattered much shimmering gold, the clear-skinned cheeks were bronzed, while her red lips were curved in laughter.

"My doubt was merely concerning the form of address to be used when one meets the Queen of the Dryads," he returned soberly. "A 'Good Morning,'

sounds so stupidly commonplace for such an occasion, you know. Perhaps I should have called devoutly, "All hail, Dawn Maiden!"

"Then you know who I am?" she said.

"I know only what you seem to be," he returned, perplexed. "Forgive my interruption of your solitude," he went on, swinging from the saddle and stepping across the log bridge. "I am Sherrod, the new owner of the Up and Down. I've been here only a couple of weeks and until this morning never rode so far this way."

She nodded. The laughter had gone from her lips and eyes and she was looking out across the lake now, musingly. Sherrod was not quite comfortable, not quite certain that she had not forgotten that he was on her side of the cliffs.

"I had the idea," he went on, "that my land comprised all of the territory within this basin, that it extended across the lake and beyond the cliffs. I bought the range without actually riding over it. I had never heard of the unique building which is, I take it, your home?" He wasn't sure that she so much as nodded this time. "Evidently I was mistaken. Am I asking too much if I request that you tell me just where my boundary line is? Am I trespassing on another man's property?"

Her eyes were turned searchingly upon him. For the moment she did not reply. "No doubt it is a little confusing," she admitted at last. "The Up and Down range does include the lakes, Mr. Sherrod. Both of them. And your line does run to the top of the cliffs. Still, I am afraid that you *are* trespassing. Just adjoining your range on the east there is a quarter section which belongs to us. Our hundred and sixty acres are mostly those cliffs yonder at the extreme eastern end of the valley. About two acres of our little place, however, are down here."

Sherrod understood now that when he had passed over the middle of the stream he had begun to trespass. He saw that the strange rambling dwelling which seemed so intimate a part of the wilderness was just beyond his line. Then his eyes went across the lake, and came to rest upon the cabin of squared logs.

"That is mine or yours?" he asked.

"Yours, I suppose." She seemed to hesitate. "Father had it built, I believe, years ago before our real home had grown. People didn't think much of boundary lines in those days, I've heard. Even now, he uses it for a sort of storeroom."

"I say," cut in Sherrod hastily. "I don't care anything about boundary lines myself. That's all right. I just asked—"

"To keep the conversation going?" she suggested.

"Well," he retorted bluntly, "why not? I did want to be neighborly — for we are neighbors, aren't we?"

"But I've never seen you before," she answered as bluntly.

"I've never seen you before, either, have I? But I'm interested in you."

SHE shrugged a lovely pair of shoulders. "The proper thing to say, I suppose," she remarked coolly. "And now, Mr. Sherrod, if there are no more questions you wish to put to me — "

"But there are," he returned imperturbably. "Two questions more. The first is, can you tell me if that is the trail yonder" — he pointed to the pass which he had noted leading southward— "which leads to the Bar Diamond?"

He saw a quick flash of interest in the big gray eyes. "That is the trail," she answered.

"And the other question," he continued quietly, "is, may I call some time?"

"That," she said, "is a matter which you had best take up with Father, hadn't you? And now I must be going in. Good morning, Mr. Sherrod."

"You might at least tell me your name," he said. "And you might let me know when I can call. I want very much to see you again."

There was a new note of laughter in her voice. "If you want to see me very much," she said in mock seriousness, "you may come."

"It is very kind of you to let me call."

"I didn't say *call.* If you want to see me very much you can prove it."

Sherrod returned her glance coolly.

"Give me the opportunity, Dawn Maiden," he said soberly.

A quick frown came. "Why do you call me that?" she demanded.

"For two reasons. First, you will re-

member that although I asked for your name you did not tell me. Second, you look like that."

"And you really don't know my name?"

"No. But you were going to tell me how I could prove to you that I want very much to see you again?"

"Yes. I have been thinking all day that I'd like to see the sun come up in the morning from Daybreak Spire. You may come to see me there. And if you do"—she laughed, "I'll bring you back to have breakfast with me, Mr. Sherrod!"

"But where is Daybreak Spire?"

"I am not answering any more questions today, kind sir," she retorted. "Good morning. . . ."

Sherrod found his ride through the Pass, over the ridge and down into the Bar Diamond country not without interest. The Pass was a steep-walled, winding canyon, at times so narrow that again he could hold out his arms and touch the granite cliffs upon each hand; at other times it would widen out to form a little pocket floored with damp sandy soil which caught and held the tracks of the cow or horse which had passed this way. This morning Sherrod saw no signs of cattle, but only the tracks which Bull Plummer's horse had left last night.

"The trail isn't traveled much," was Sherrod's thought, for the only other signs at all clear were at least two weeks old. Presumably they had been left by Hawley when he had ridden furiously to the Bar Diamond from the Up and Down and a bad beating.

It was an hour after leaving the shore of the Upper Lake before he left the up-climbing trail behind him and rode out through the "Notch" and to the top of the cliffs. He drew his panting horse to a stand-still.

"And now," he said to himself, "where is Daybreak Spire?"

Everywhere about him the cliffs reached up into flinty peaks. Had there been only one peak it would have been a simple matter; but there were scores of lofty spires. Which one?

"It was to prove that I wanted very much to see her again," he mused. "And so it's the highest, hardest to climb. Aha! There you are!"

Turning slowly, letting his eyes range along the top of the mountains upon the far side of the valley, back of the spot where he had seen her, he picked out the one peak which he very promptly told himself should be Daybreak Spire. It would catch the first glint of the rising sun before its neighbors, for it stood alone, rising abruptly from a rocky plateau. The top had the appearance of a needle-point; but, allowing for distance, Sherrod decided that there would be quite enough room for a man and a woman to sit there comfortably.

HE TURNED southward again, across barren tableland, and between ten and eleven o'clock came to the fall of cliffs, from the top of which he might look down into the lands of the Bar Diamond.

Here he saw a valley very much like the one from which he had ridden. The lakes at the upper end were missing, but a swift stream of water, taking its source in mountain springs, sped through the range and formed another Up and Down creek. And below him, in a wide meadow, were the Bar Diamond range buildings and corrals.

"A first-class outfit," thought Sherrod as he looked down upon the browsing cattle and horses.

He found the down-leading trail and stopped no more until he had reached the valley. Here he came suddenly upon an old corral, one side of which was a sheer cliff, the other sides being roughly fashioned of logs and boulders. At the base of the knoll upon which the corral stood were three men, sitting their horses carelessly and watching the cattle. Sherrod saw that one of the men was his visitor of last night, and rode to meet him.

"Good morning," he said, as he drew rein close to Plummer.

"I don't know that I quite savvy your play," said the Bar Diamond owner his eyes never for an instant leaving Sherrod's smiling ones.

"What do you mean?" queried Sherrod.

"I mean," returned Plummer bluntly, "that your right-hand man is a blasted crook and that I've told him to go for his gun and go for it quick when we cross

trails! So, I guess you and me had better have things understood, too."

"That's what I came for," Sherrod assured him. "I didn't want you to think that Ross acted on my orders last night when he rode after you and made you give the money back."

The two men with Bull Plummer exchanged quick glances. Plummer's expression did not alter.

"If he hadn't come up on me unexpected and from behind," muttered Plummer, "he wouldn't have rode back at all."

"He didn't tell me how he did it," answered Sherrod. "I didn't want to know. I rode over this morning, Mr. Plummer, to apologize for what has happened, and to return your money to you."

He drew from his pocket a bulging purse, poured a handful of coins into his palm and extended it to the Bar Diamond man. The three looked at him first in plain amazement, then in a contempt scarcely less plain. Plummer's big hand came out and in a flash the coins went into his pocket.

"You're square, Sherrod," he said slowly. "I'm glad to have you for a neighbor. Hawley"—he spoke sharply to the heavy-set man at his elbow—"you and Smith haze them cattle a little further up in the canyons. By then it'll be dinner and after dinner we'll take a run down to the lower corrals."

Hawley and Smith raced off across the narrow end of the valley. Their laughter floated back. Plummer frowned and turned his own horse toward the Bar Diamond.

"It's pretty near dinnertime, anyhow," he said carelessly. "We'll have time to unsaddle and have a couple drinks before the boys show up."

"I'd like to" Sherrod hesitated. "And you promised to give me a chance for my revenge, you know."

"Come on," cried Plummer.

Sherrod shook his head. "I'd certainly like to," he repeated. "But I have a great deal to do. I am taking personal control of the Up and Down, and the ins and outs of the work aren't as simple as a man would think, are they? No, I'm afraid we'll have to let it wait a while. But, I tell you what I'll do. I'll take a little ride with you down to your headquarters. I'd like to see how you have things arranged. And then really I must hurry back."

SO SIDE by side they rode to the Bar Diamond, Sherrod looking with great interest at the land, the outbuildings, the corrals, the arrangement of everything. Then, with a swift glance at his watch and a smile, he said "So long," and rode back toward the Up and Down.

Before Sherrod was out of sight, Hawley had ridden a sweating horse into the barn, and leaving the animal saddled he hastened to the ranchhouse.

"Well?" he demanded of Plummer.

Bull Plummer looked at him steadily a moment, then said bluntly:

"Get the boys ready, Hawley. There ain't no use wastin' time at a chance like this. Get Tom and Lofty down to the other end tonight. I ain't quite sure of them boys yet. And we ain't goin' to take no chances."

"Hard Ross," began Hawley, only to be cut short by a snarled:

"He's due to take a trip right soon to a place they don't run cattle none!"

IV

IT WAS late afternoon when Sherrod rode back to the Up and Down. He found Hard Ross in the corrals saddling a fresh horse.

"It's nearly time to quit work, isn't it?" remarked Sherrod, slipping awkwardly and stiffly from the saddle. "And you look like you're just starting out."

"I am," was the reply. "Got a big job and a mighty pleasant job on my hands."

Sherrod was unsaddling. "What is it?"

"It ain't ranch business," said Ross shortly. "It's just my affairs, same as it's your affairs where you been ridin' all day."

Sherrod laughed. "I told you what I was going to do. I rode over to the Bar Diamond to return Mr. Plummer's money. By the way, Ross, where's Daybreak Spire?"

"Daybreak what?" Ross stared at him, frowning. "I've lived in this neck of the woods quite some time, pardner, and I never heard of a man or a horse or a creek or an outfit called Daybreak anything."

"I rather supposed that most people wouldn't know it by that name," sighed Sherrod. "Say, what's the name of the people who live up by the Twin Lakes?"

"Madden," said Ross, and swung up into saddle.

"Who are they?"

"They're Maddens. Some folks call him the Hermit, and some say he is part crazy. And there's his stepdaughter. Her mother's dead."

"What's her name, Ross?"

"Her name's Dawn." Ross noted Sherrod's start, and smiled. "That's pretty near the same thing as Daybreak, ain't it?"

"Where do you expect to find Hawley?" was Sherrod's next question. "Going to ride all the way over to the Bar Diamond?"

"Who said I was looking for Hawley?"

"I did. It's just two weeks since I came to the Up and Down, and you gave him two weeks to bring Silver Slippers back to you. What made you think he stole her, Ross?"

"It's gettin' late," was the noncommittal answer. "So long."

"Wait a minute. I'm going with you."

Hard Ross gaped. "Well, I'll be hanged! What do you want to do that for?"

"Look here, Ross." Sherrod was polishing his pince-nez with unnecessary energy. "You've been pretty decent to me this week, and I appreciate it. Now you're riding into danger and I'm not going to let you go alone."

Hard Ross' big voice boomed out in a roar of hearty laughter.

"You're goin' along to keep me from gettin' hurt, huh?"

"Let's say for the view! Now, rope me a fresh horse, Ross. I'll have something to eat while you're getting him."

He gave his order and hurried off. Ross watched him a moment, then loosening his coiled rope caught a tall roan that Sherrod had ridden once or twice, saddled it, and tied it to a post. Then he turned his own horse out toward the upper end and "rode on his spurs" to get away from the man who wanted to protect him.

Ross soon left the main trail, and once he was riding where he felt Sherrod would not find him he drew his horse down to a swift walk. He was looking for trouble tonight. He was riding straight into it with both eyes open, and he was too old a hand to spend his horse's strength and speed before time came for it. A fresh horse might mean a live man in the morning or a dead man tonight.

"It's two weeks today," he told himself. "Hawley'll be rememberin' that. He'll be lookin' for me."

In these steep-walled canyons darkness came swift upon the heels of the sunset. Before Hard Ross had come to the steep climb from the floor of the valley to the level of the Lower Lake it was pitch black about him. When he made the ascent he did it warily, and on reaching the top rode on cautiously. He didn't put it beyond Hawley to ambush him. He passed the first lake, came abreast of the second and saw the black mouth of the Pass opening before him. And then, for the first time, he heard a sound which was not a part of the harmony of the night noises of the wilderness.

SOMEONE was walking toward him, the soft footfall cracking the dry twigs in the grass. He slipped from the darkness. He saw a spurt of flame and a gun came leaping out of his holster, ready. But the flame was only a match.

The match went its short journey to the ground, then the larger flame of a leaping bonfire licked at the darkness. The sudden, bright light made the mouth of the Pass as clear as day, and Hard Ross saw with astonishment, who had lighted the fire, and now stood back a pace from it.

Dawn Madden!

"What's she doin' that for?" came his quick, questioning thought, for he had been certain it was Hawley. Then an explanation came. "Madden made her do it!" was his quick decision. "And Bull Plummer made *him* do it! If I ride on through there's goin' to be powder burnt inside two minutes! They're a nest of thieves together!"

He waited a moment, undecided what to do. There was no way open beyond save the Pass; and if he rode into the Pass . . .

He swung back up into saddle. He was not going back. He had made Hawley a

promise and he was going to keep it. He gathered up his reins in his left hand, his right whipped out his revolver and his spurs were drawn back to send his horse racing through the circle of light.

Hard Ross heard the girl cry out in sharp surprise as he rode by her and toward the mouth of the Pass. He was leaning low over his horse's neck and riding on his spurs when he saw a quick spurt of red fire from the shadows in front of him, heard the snarling crack of a revolver and knew that Hawley was there, waiting for him.

The bullet whizzed by him and sang through the night. He heard the pound of running hoofs behind him, heard Dawn Madden cry out again. He saw once more the angry spit of fire, not twenty paces from him, and still riding furiously he threw up his gun and fired.

"Stay with him, Ross! I'm coming!"

Sherrod's voice! Ringing clear! Ross cursed as he fired again into the darkness. He was almost through the circle of light now, but that fire was growing brighter each second, leaping higher. There was another spit of flame in front of him, and Hard Ross, seeking to fire back, felt his revolver slipping from a nerveless hand, felt a hot streak of pain through his shoulder. Cursing his sudden weakness he pitched forward.

"Stay with him, Ross! I'm coming!"

Sherrod's voice again. Ross, weak and dizzy on the ground, cursed more normally. If it were only Sunny Harper or Little John or Mute! Anybody but the biggest tenderfoot he'd ever seen!

Hard Ross felt another tearing pain in his side and knew that Hawley had shot him again.

Hard Ross could not believe he saw what he did see, after that.

He saw Sherrod race by him, stooping a little from the saddle as he swept past, then straightening again. A shout in Hawley's unmistakable voice cried to him to stop. And still he rode on and as he rode he laughed.

Again there was the red spit of fire from the gun in Hawley's hand. Sherrod's hand leaped to his hip, flung upward. The crack of his revolver came before the echoes from Hawley's gun had died away. Sherrod fired once only, then jammed the gun back into his holster and swung back to Hard Ross.

"You fool!" cried the foreman weakly. "He'll shoot you!"

Sherrod had swung down from saddle.

"Not hurt bad are you?" he asked anxiously.

"You fool!" repeated Ross, trying to sit up, then sinking back, the blood pouring across his chest. "We're in the light —he'll get you!"

"He won't get anybody, Ross," returned Sherrod. "Didn't you see me shoot?"

"You shoot? And you can't hit a tree."

"I never missed a man yet," came the cool retort. "Now be quiet. You're pretty badly shot up. And remember that I'm running this outfit and that you take orders from me!"

THE quick firmness of the voice puzzled Ross. He looked up into Sherrod's face, wondering. Then he saw that Sherrod's nose-glasses were not in their accustomed place and that in the eyes there was an unfamiliar sternness. A sudden great suspicion broke like light into his brain. He gasped. "Say! Who are you? What's your name?"

"Sherrod. Now don't go to—"

"Not *Jim* Sherrod? Not from the Painted Rock country? Not—"

"It's nobody's business where I'm from, is it?" said Sherrod quickly. "My name's Sherrod and I'm your boss. That's enough!"

But it wasn't enough for Hard Ross. "You let me knock you down!" he muttered. "And I didn't know how close I stood to dyin'. You're Fancy Jim Sherrod, that's who you are. And I thought you was a tenderfoot! O-o-ok!"

For a moment the lithe form of Sherrod bent over Ross. Sherrod's voice, in a swift, stern whisper spoke but a few words, and Hard Ross, half-fainting from loss of blood, nodded that he understood.

"I am playing this hand my way," was what Sherrod had said briefly. "Can you keep your mouth shut, Ross?"

Ross lay back against the ground now, his head whirling. "Fancy Jim" Sherrod! The man whose famous draw was like lightning, the man who, single-handed, had cleaned out the Luke Veri-

lees gang with only four shots fired. And this man, born to bucking horses and running steers, had come to the Up and Down wearing a derby hat and noseglasses and with a smudge of ink on his fingers!

Sherrod, busy over his foreman's wounds, in the dancing firelight was striving to bandage them and stop the rush of blood. He heard Hard Ross muttering.

"You mustn't talk any more than you have to, Ross," he said. "Is it something you've got to say?"

Ross nodded. Jim Sherrod put his ear close down to the hot lips and heard the mutter:

"Hawley ain't moved yet."

"No," returned Sherrod quietly. "He isn't going to move, Ross."

"He must of rode a horse, Sherrod. Will you go and see if—"

"If it's Silver Slippers?" Sherrod drew the swiftly improvised bandages tight and got to his feet. "You're going to live through it all right, Ross. It'll take a lot of killing to put you down for good. Yes, I'll go and see."

Then, for the first time, Jim Sherrod saw Dawn. Her eyes were wide with horror.

"You here?" he cried.

Her voice was shaky. "Is he dead?"

"Ross? No. He'll live."

"No, no! The other man."

"I think he is dead," he returned gravely. "I hope he is."

"Ask her—who built—the fire!" came Ross' voice weakly.

Sherrod's eyes were suddenly steely with a cold glitter as they flashed to the wide eyes of the girl.

"I—I—" she cried wildly. And then, her voice ringing in a wail of despair, she was gone.

Fancy Jim Sherrod stared after her a moment. Then, with a little grunt, he strode into the mouth of the Pass where Hawley lay. Hawley's gun was just beyond the outstretched fingertips; the body was still.

With swift strides Sherrod passed on into the canyon. The horse stood in a sharp turn of the trail. Sherrod led it back to the foreman. It was a rangy sorrel, not Silver Slippers.

"Never mind, Ross. We'll get your horse for you yet. And we'll send the sorrel along the trail to the Bar Diamond as a sort of foreword that we're coming."

He struck the horse smartly upon the rump, sending it flying along the up trail. Then he turned back to Ross.

"You'll spend the night with the Maddens," he said gently, "and if you're in shape we'll get you home tomorrow."

HARD ROSS was lying back, his eyes closed, his face dead white. Sherrod stooped to slip his hands under the broad shoulders, then straightened up abruptly! Conscious that someone was standing almost at his side, Sherrod stared. The man's face was that of a man of the city, one with an unhealthy pallor. The features were delicate, the forehead high, the deep-set eyes brilliantly black. The man wore a dark dressing-gown and slippers.

"I'm Mr. Madden," he said. "I heard you speak my name. What's been happening here?"

"This man is badly hurt," Sherrod answered. "He has a couple of bullet-holes through him."

"I heard the firing. Who is he?"

"Ross, the Up and Down foreman."

"Who shot him? You?"

"No. A man named Hawley."

"Where's Hawley then?"

"Back there in the trail."

"Why doesn't he come on or run for it?"

"For the same reason that Ross doesn't move," Sherrod said shortly. "I told you Ross is badly hurt. I want to get him inside, and—"

"You can't bring him into my house," snapped Madden. "I haven't any desire to get mixed up in this brawl!"

Sherrod was dumbfounded. "You refuse to let this man be taken into your house?"

"Exactly," Madden answered coolly. "What do I know about this affair? I knew Hawley. He was a good, steady man. I don't know you other fellows and I don't want to."

He swung upon his heel, stepping back into the shadows.

Sherrod again bent over Hard Ross.

"Can you get your arms around my neck?" he asked. "Try to help."

Ross lifted his two big hands weakly and clasped them about Sherrod's neck. Sherrod straightened, lifting his foreman in his arms. Remembering the landmarks he had seen this morning—the great block of granite, the log bridge—he made his way carefully toward the shelter which had been refused.

"You're goin' to take me in anyhow?" whispered Ross faintly.

"Of course," answered Sherrod quietly.

He carried his burden to the entrance between the two boulders. But the great door of rough-hewn slabs had been shut and fastened with a heavy lock. Sherrod laid Ross down on the grass.

"Stand aside in there!" he called loudly. "I'm going to shoot the lock off!"

No answer came. Sherrod whipped a revolver from its holster, placed the muzzle close to the lock and fired. Then he put his knee to the door, pressed, and the thick panels flew back.

Again he took Ross up into his arms, moved across the threshhold and into a wide, high room, whose walls and ceiling were of beautifully veined highly-polished woods, whose floor was hardwood, glistening and bare save for the great bearskin rugs here and there. There were two or three deep leather chairs and a couple of couches with soft cushions.

Sherrod laid the wounded man upon the nearest couch.

"You realize of course, that you are breaking the law, Mr. Sherrod?" It was Madden's voice and Madden was standing across the room, his pale face distorted by a black rage.

"I realize that the only law which counts at a time like this is the law of humanity, Mr. Madden," Sherrod returned sternly. "I shall be glad to pay for any damage done."

He gave his attention to Ross, stripping away the clothing from the limp body, seeking again to stop the flow of blood. As Madden watched, white-faced, Sherrod could not understand the look in the man's eyes. He saw Madden's hands nervously twisting at the tassel of the cord about his dressing-gown.

"He's afraid of something," Sherrod told himself. "But what?"

MADDEN broke the silence at last. "What about the man Hawley? Are you going to leave him out there for the coyotes?" It was coldly spoken.

"I am going out to look to him in a moment," Sherrod returned as coldly. "I expect to find that he is dead. With your permission I'll bring the body into the house."

"And without my permission?"

"I'll bring him in anyway."

Madden shrugged. "Do as you please," he snapped. "I wish the whole crowd of you was in hell!" He turned and disappeared behind some silken curtains.

Hard Ross' voice came faint. "If you're goin' out, slip my gun in my hand, Sherrod. I don't trust that man none!"

"You don't think he'd kill you, do you?" Sherrod asked incredulously.

"Slip my gun in my hand, anyway," said Ross.

Sherrod placed Ross's revolver on the couch so that Ross's lax fingers rested on the butt, and went out. He was assured that a man of Ross' physique would pull through, with rest now and care later.

Sherrod came to where Hawley's body lay, and there white and wide-eyed, he found Dawn Madden.

"He is dead!" she cried wildly. "And I have done this!"

Sherrod tried not to remember that her hands had lighted the fire which had so nearly brought Ross to his death. Gently he laid a hand upon her shaking shoulder.

"Dawn," he said, "you must not talk like that. You must not think like that. Listen to me, Dawn—"

But she shook her head. "I lighted the fire—you fired the shot," she said harshly. "We are both killers!" Her voice sank. "Tell me," she said, "is Ross, too, going to die?"

Before he could answer he saw her body begin to sway, and he thought she was going to fall. In an instant his arms were about her, and he was holding her tight. But again her trembling body stiffened and she thrust his away from her.

"Don't let him die," she said dully. "You mustn't let him. If Ross dies to-

night I have caused the deaths of two men."

And then, in a flash, she was gone, not into the house but down to the lakeside and on into the wilderness of great trees and giant cliffs. And Jim Sherrod, watching her until the darkness hid her, felt his heart go after her.

The moon brought him back to earth. A long finger of light trembling across the Upper Lake, pointed to the dugout against the cliffs on the further side. He could put Hawley there, close the door, pile rocks against it and leave the body until Plummer's men could come for it.

He strode rapidly about the head of the lake and to the dugout door. In the bright moonlight he could see that the rough building was, as Dawn had told him, very old. The rotting logs looked as if a man could jam his fist through them. The door, of heavy oak slabs, looked as flimsy as the rest of the shack.

He put his hand against the door and pushed at first gently, then firmly, his full weight against the worm-eaten old panels. The door did not budge.

"That's funny," muttered Sherrod, then saw a heavy padlock. "That's stranger yet," he told himself. "To put a lock like that on the door of a building whose walls a good puff of wind would blow down!"

Of no mind to shoot this lock off, too, he went around to the side of the dugout where in the wall he found a log that was loose, its surface rotten. With a quick jerk he pulled it away so that he could slip his hand through the opening this made.

AS HE did a bullet whizzed by his head and imbedded itself in the wall. He leaped backward, but not before he had realized that the shot had been fired from the house where he had left Hard Ross—and not until he had felt what lay behind the wall of rotting logs. Of the two things the rifle bullet puzzled him the less. For his fingers had come against a solid wall of sheet iron. This old shack, looking so flimsy, was in reality a kind of safe, which could be broken into only with something like dynamite.

"Madden's storeroom!" muttered Sherrod, "Walls of sheet iron, one wall the granite cliff itself! What has the man got so precious that he hides it here? He shot to kill that time, too! I think, Mr. Madden, you're going to have some questions to answer before long."

V

WALKING warily, Sherrod came back to where Hawley lay. He gathered up the body in his arms and went swiftly to the dwelling. He placed his burden upon the other couch in the room where Hard Ross was lying.

"Sherrod!"

"Yes, Ross."

He went to Ross' side in answer to the whisper and bent low over him.

"I—I heard a rifle, Sherrod."

"That's right. Someone took a potshot at me."

"Madden," whispered the foreman. "I saw him get his rifle. The curtains were caught back."

"I thought so. It's all right, I tell you, Ross. I'll keep my eyes open."

"Send for the rest of the boys," whispered Ross. "We'll need 'em in the mornin'. Just start my horse—he'll go home. The boys'll see him in the corral first thing in the mornin' and—"

"Yes," interrupted Sherrod thoughtfully. "I'll do that."

In a corner of the room he found a writing table. He wrote a short note to fasten to the horn of the saddle, explaining that Ross was hurt, that he and Ross were at Madden's, and ordering Sunny Harper and Little John to come right away. They were to bring some sort of stretcher with them, and were to rush a man to White Rock for a doctor.

Once more he left the room, found Ross' horse and his where they had been left in the trail, started his foreman's animal on the down trail after tying the note to the saddle. He tethered his own roan to browse during the night, and came back quickly. He saw nothing of Madden, heard nothing of him.

"Now, Ross," he said when he had closed the outside door, "I want you to rest. I won't leave you a second until the boys come. Tomorrow we'll have a doctor out from White Rock. Now shut

your eyes and sleep."

Sunny Harper and Little John, their horses' hides dripping with sweat, dashed up to the Madden place a little after midnight. They went straight to where Hard Ross lay upon his couch, bending solicitously over him.

"Hurt bad, Ross?" questioned Sunny, his voice unbelievably soft.

Ross' head moved a little back and forth among his cushions, negatively.

"Hawley done it?"

"Yes."

"And you got Hawley?"

Hard Ross' eyes, uncertain, went to where Sherrod sat. Sherrod came to the couch.

"Does it hurt you much to talk, Ross?"

"No," the foreman answered, and smiled grimly. "It hurts more to keep my mouth shut!"

"Then talk," said Sherrod. "Harper and Little John know how to put a double hitch in their tongues, don't they?"

"They sure do!" And Hard Ross haltingly told his story. "Sherrod nailed Hawley," he concluded. "He come just in time. He's from the Painted Rock country—he's Fancy Jim Sherrod!"

Sunny Harper and Little John swung about as if startled by a pistol shot.

"Fancy Jim?" Sunny asked. "And us fools thought he was a tenderfoot!"

Little John was stricken speechless, staring at the man who knew more about horses and six-guns and crooked trails than probably any other man in the West.

"Now," said Fancy Jim Sherrod sharply, "you boys let Ross alone. He needs all the rest there is. And I'll spin you a yarn. Things are about ripe, anyway. To start off with, I bought the Up and Down outfit from Hodges all right, but I took it over with my eyes open. I've been looking for a place like this ever since I sold my place at Painted Rock. I knew the Up and Down and other ranches hereabouts have been losing stock steadily. But I got the ranch at my figure and"—his tone was significant—"I learned that Bull Plummer was running the outfit next door. It looked pretty simple."

"You knew Bull Plummer?" demanded Sunny.

"I had never seen him and fortunately he had never seen me. But he worked a game with all the earmarks of this one in Montana fifteen years ago—and got away with it. My idea was to buy the outfit, take charge and let the news get around that I'm a tenderfoot and pretty much a fool in the bargain. I let Plummer ride right into camp and skin me out of five hundred dollars. What happens? You boys do the usual amount of talking and the news rides!"

SUNNY HARPER and Little John hung their heads.

"It's all right!" cried Sherrod. "The whole country, Bull Plummer included, assumes I am a greenie."

"You mean," asked Sunny Harper that Bull Plummer'll see a chance for a raw play? He'll make it without wastin' no time—"

"And we'll nail him!" whispered Hard Ross. "Oh—I wish I could ride a horse!"

"Lie still, Ross," commanded Sherrod. "All you've got to do right now is to take care of yourself. You boys sit close to Ross and keep your eyes open. I'm going out for a little ride."

As he swept up his hat and stalked out, Sunny Harper's eyes followed him.

"Old Fancy Jim!" he whispered. "Us fellers is about due to see a spell of high life real soon. Huh, Ross?"

Whereupon Hard Ross nodded and then lay very still, determined to take Sherrod's advice, to get his strength back in time for the showdown.

Fancy Jim Sherrod mounted and rode the trail which Dawn Madden had taken in her wild flight. She had taken a well-defined trail leading along the cliffs, turning so that it swung around in a half circle toward the mountains behind Madden's home. As the trail wound so did it climb, becoming a narrow foothold hanging precariously to the granite cliffs.

He felt certain that she had gone this way; there seemed no other way open to her unless she had turned aside into the tangle of brush and chaos of tumbled boulders. He stopped whenever there was a bit of sandy soil in the trail and a bit of moonlight, looking for her tracks. And at last, high up above the floor of

the valley, in a little gorge where the sandy floor was damp, he found the mark of her moccasins.

"Poor little frightened thing," he muttered as he straightened up. And then, his words bespeaking the swift trend of his thought:

"That man Madden! Why must he drag her into the mess?"

In this gorge he left his horse securely and proceeded on foot. He came at last to a little, sloping plateau and from here he could see a little further to the north, a great steep-sided tower of rock lifting its crest like a lofty campanile five hundred feet above the benchland upon which he stood. The moonlight touched the monumental peak, showed the black fissures in the grayish white of the stone and outlined the summit against the star-set sky with rare, soft distinctness.

"Daybreak Spire!" he whispered. "She is up there—and I am going!"

And then because the night was clear, the moon almost at the full, he saw her standing on the very crest of Daybreak Spire, her slender body outlined against the sky.

He began climbing swiftly, and after half an hour reached her side.

"I have come before the appointed hour, Miss Madden," he said quietly. "But I wanted to talk with you. You will forgive me?"

She was standing as he had seen her when first he came to the tableland below, looking out into the night. She had not moved in all this time, he thought swiftly. She was unconscious of physical fatigue or discomfort; she was fighting her battle of the spirit tonight. He felt that dimly though he could not understand yet just what that battle was.

She turned to him slowly, quietly. The terror he had seen in her eyes down there in the valley had not entirely gone yet. Her face was white and she looked tired.

"I want to talk with you," he repeated gently. "I want you to sit down and listen to me. If you don't relax a bit you're going to pieces."

He laid his hand gently upon her arm. She shook it off with a little shudder. Still saying nothing she moved back to a slab of rock ten feet away and sat down.

"Hawley is dead," she said, her voice strangely steady.

"Yes. But you must not blame—"

"I know what I know," she went on in the same steady voice of unutterable soul weariness. "And Ross? Will he die, too?"

"No," Sherrod said. "Ross is going to get well."

"But Hawley is dead. And you—you killed him!"

"Yes, I killed him," he agreed quietly.

NOW he understood why she had shuddered.

"Poor Dawn! It's a bad mess for a girl like you to be drawn into."

And then he understood why she had shuddered. "You are so conventionally polite!" she said with the first display of anything bordering on emotion in her voice. "It makes me wonder if you fully realize just what has happened tonight—"

"You mean that I have killed a man and am not hysterical over it? Is that it?"

She shivered as if cold. "It is a horrible thing to kill a man. It seems almost more horrible to be unmoved by having done it." She paused. "I heard Ross call you Fancy Jim Sherrod," she said. "Are you—that man?"

"Men have called me Fancy Jim Sherrod," he answered slowly. "I am from the Painted Rock country."

"Then you—you have killed other men!"

"I have killed other men," he said gravely. "But I draw on no man save in self-defense or in the defense of another. Tonight—you saw it—you know that there was no other way."

"You fired to kill." She was staring at him with her piteously wide eyes. Then she shuddered again.

"If I hadn't would Hard Ross be alive now? He had two bullets through his body and Hawley was still shooting!"

For a long time she was silent. Then she said:

"I suppose you did right. I suppose a man could do what you did and still be a good man. And yet—I'd rather be dead than have you touch me!"

Then at last her head drooped into her hands, she shivered from the moon-

lit crown of her hair to her moccasined feet. And in a moment Sherrod could hear her sobs, could see the shaking of her body.

He waited until the sobbing ceased, until the tortured body was still. And then when he spoke it was more gently than before.

"You don't understand all that a man may feel," he said soberly. "There are times in a country like ours where a man must take upon himself a great responsibility, the greatest responsibility perhaps which a man can shoulder. He must decide in a matter which concerns not himself alone but the whole social fabric. He must decide what he will do. Will he be a man and stand by his rights and by his friends; will he weaken when the test comes and prove himself all incompetent to live the life a man must live in the wild places of the West? He has one swift fraction of a second to decide—and that brief moment measures him as man or manikin. It would have been easier for me to have held back and let Hawley put his third bullet through Ross' brain. And yet—" his voice hardened a little—"you would rather be dead than have me lay my hand upon your arm!"

He did not look at her. His eyes went moodily to rest upon the bank of mist lying below them. Neither of them spoke, but both had bitter thoughts. Then he asked suddenly:

"You made that brush fire, Miss Madden. Why?"

She started, "I—" She hesitated and stood up. "We shall not wait for the dawn here," she said quietly. "We are going down to the house."

"And you will tell me there?" he asked.

"I shall tell you there," she replied. "Or I shall not see you any more."

She left him, walking swiftly. He followed her making no further attempt at speech with her.

He watched her, fearful more than once that her tired body was unable to cope with the exigencies of the dangerous trail, ready to reach out and snatch her if she slipped. And yet not once did he offer his hand as they traveled downward. For she would rather be dead than have him touch her.

When they came down to where Sherrod's tethered horse was waiting the first faint light of the false dawn was shining about the crest of Daybreak Spire above them. They dropped down into the mist, passed through it and came at last to the lake. In a little while it would be sunup here.

They did not once speak on the long downward trail. At the door through which Sherrod was to enter the house she left him. She would go in at some door at the back. She spoke swiftly, as if she would have it over with.

"You will want to eat, I suppose! Come to me in the breakfast room in half an hour. I shall have something to tell you then—or I shall never speak with you again." Then she was gone.

VI

JIM SHERROD, entering the house, saw swiftly that during his absence something serious had happened. Sunny Harper, leaning over Ross' couch as Sherrod threw open the door, whirled suddenly, and came forward, his face stern and hard, his eyes blazing.

"Plummer's put another one acrost on us!" he snapped. "Mute just rode up with the word. Him and Little John is takin' a look aroun'. You know that herd of beef steers we slapped into the Big Tree meadow? They're gone, the whole fifty head!"

"And you think Plummer—"

"Who else?"

"We're going to get busy, Sunny," Jim Sherrod said quietly. "We're going to trail those steers. We're going to find them on the Bar Diamond and it's going to be the last deal Bull Plummer puts across with this outfit!"

"They're the pick of the range, Sherrod." It was Hard Ross' voice. "Over four thousand dollars' worth of stock gone and me flat on my back."

"Ross," said Sherrod sternly, "you lie still and get well. Harper, go out and send Little John on the jump back to the Up and Down for the boys. I want 'em all here on the run and armed. You come back here and look out for Ross. Send Mute here, too. I want to talk with him."

Sunny Harper sped away. And Jim

Sherrod, coming to Ross' side to ask how he had passed the night, heard from somewhere in the house the low voice of Dawn, the sharp, impatient tones of Madden.

"We'll have a doctor here before long, Ross," he said. "We'll leave you here until he comes. I'll leave one of the boys with you. Then we'll move you to the U and D bunkhouse, if he orders it, or we'll move you into town, if he advises that."

"You're goin' after Plummer this trip?" asked Ross.

"We're going to try and find out where those steers went. Why, their tracks won't be cold yet! And we're going to bring them back. And—yes, I think that we'll have to ride over to the Bar Diamond to get them."

Then Mute Adams came in, his steady eyes a trifle curious and showing a new respect as they rested upon the owner of the Up and Down.

"Tell me about those steers, Mute," commanded Sherrod crisply. "How did you learn about it so soon?"

Then Mute belied his name and spoke swiftly.

"After Sunny and Little John pulled out, sayin' Ross was hurt bad, none of us went back to sleep. Me and Happy Day finally got a hunch to ride on up this way. We rode slow, talkin' about this and that, and I says to Happy, 'Them big steers'll be rollin' in fat in another week, Hap.' He sorta laughs, sayin' somethin' about if they're still here. It didn't seem nowise possible they wouldn't be.

"Well, we come to the big meadow where we oughta see some of them steers, and we don't see anything. Hap looks at me and I looks at Hap. 'Shucks,' I says, 'they're under the cliffs.' So we mooches over, but the steers ain't there. Tracks didn't tell much, seein' the meadow's all full of tracks; but down by the crick we found tracks as did talk. There was horses' tracks, and on the south bank where there's mud and long grass we come acrost sign you could of read even if there wasn't no moon.

"A man had crossed the crick there, drivin' half a dozen steers, and his horse had fell. There's the prints of the horses's knees and the stirrup where it cut into the mud. It was fresh sign, but nary a one of them fifty steers in sight!"

"Didn't you try to see which way the herd had gone?" asked Sherrod.

"Yes, we tried. But the meadow's too cut up to show sign in the night-time. We got a pretty good guess there was five or six saddle horses, and we got a guess the steers was crowded on the run acrost to the dark under the cliffs."

"The south cliffs?"

MUTE ADAMS nodded.

"Yes, the side next to the Bar Diamond."

"And what time do you think the thing happened?" asked Sherrod.

"I'd jedge about midnight. Not over four or five hours ago." He burst out violently, "Think of the nerve of it! On a night with a full moon!"

"Never mind, Adams," said Sherrod quietly. "Those steers won't get far in four hours, not through these mountains. They must have skirted the lake on the other side and turned southward through the Pass. We'll find the tracks —and we'll find the cattle on the Bar Diamond! You boys be ready for trouble!"

"We been more or less expectin' trouble as soon's we found out Ross was shot up," said Sunny Harper who had returned.

"All right. Wait here. I'm going to try to scare up something to eat."

He had for a little forgotten the indistinct voices coming from the deeper interior of the house. Now he heard them, Madden's irritable voice expostulating, Dawn's tones hushed and troubled. Suddenly there was an angry cry from Madden, a scream from the girl.

"Stay with Ross!" Sherrod called, ran to the silk curtains, flung them back and ran toward the rear of the house.

First came a great, high room which would have drawn his admiration had he had any time for it. Here was a spring, bubbling up clear and cool in a rock-rimmed basin, dancing across the stone floor in a little hollowed channel, to sink out of sight and run under the floor of the room he had left, then to appear again outside as the stream with

the log bridge across it. It was like some flowery patio in a tropical home, save that a roof shut out the sky and chandeliers made a soft light.

There were bearskin rugs everywhere; there were silken cushions and an exquisite bit of statuary in white marble beside a flower-edged natural pool in which a few brilliantly speckled trout steered sharply. There were wide deep windows looking out through the trees and vines upon the outside wall; there was a broad, winding staircase of glistening hardwood leading thirty feet upward to a balcony that was a riot of colored blossoms, and where Sherrod's quick eyes espied couch, cushions and a table, book covered.

The voices were silent now. They had come from some room still farther back. Sherrod saw a narrow door in the extreme left-hand corner of the great room. He rushed to it, jerked it open, ran on into a long hallway, through another door and suddenly found himself in a roomy kitchen where a Chinese, a big man with a hard, cruel face, was cooking breakfast.

"Where are they?" demanded Sherrod. "Madden and Miss Dawn?"

The Chinese grunted, "Me no sabe," he answered.

He knew well enough, and Sherrod knew that. Catching sight of another door Sherrod passed hastily through the kitchen and into the breakfast room. The table was set, but the room was empty. Then, before he could reach the door leading into the dining room he heard another door close noisily. Madden, his face drawn and white, had come into the breakfast room.

"For a stranger you make yourself very much at home, Mr. Sherrod," he said coolly. "May I ask what you want?"

"I want to see Miss Madden," retorted Sherrod as coolly, though his blood was running hot. "Where is she?"

"She has gone to her room, if it is any of your affair. She is tired out."

"But"—Sherrod's disbelief was in his eyes—"she was to meet me at breakfast. She was to tell me—"

"What?" snapped Madden.

"What you didn't want her to tell!" cried Sherrod angrily. "So you have shut her up somewhere. Madden, I am going to find her for myself!"

Madden stood away from the door, making no answer. Sherrod, passing him, hastened through the empty rooms, calling Dawn's name. . . .

THE sun had flared up over the steep cliffs and was pouring a stream of golden light down upon the lakes, drinking up the fog, ushering in a brilliant cloudless day. A half dozen men, grim in their silence, were riding the trail, whose end might well bring to any man of them his death.

Fancy Jim Sherrod rode well to the front. An hour earlier he had gone his way through the great, many-roomed house calling. He had had his answer.

"Go away!" Dawn Madden had cried from behind a locked door. "I have nothing to say to you. Go away!"

He had gone without another word. He had breakfast in Madden's breakfast room, commanding the Chinese to bring him his food and not once addressing Madden or being addressed by him. He had seen that Sunny Harper, Mute, and Happy had had their breakfasts; he had seen that Hard Ross had had something carried to him; he had left Mute Adams to take care of the wounded man; and then the other boys had ridden up from the Up and Down.

Now, with them at his back, he was riding. Their faces turned towards the Bar Diamond, and of all the hard faces Fancy Jim Sherrod's was the hardest. He could not drag his mind entirely away from the girl who could tell him a great deal if she wished and yet who had cried, "Go away! I have nothing to say to you. Go away!"

She could not bear to have him touch her; now it seemed that she could not bring herself to speak with him. Just because he had done a man's part when it had been offered him, just because he had fired last night that shot which had come between Hard Ross and his death, because he had killed a man who was a crook and a coward and who, hidden in the dark, was pumping lead into a man fallen, lying wounded in the firelight—the firelight which Dawn Madden had made.

These gaunt-bodied, lean, hard-muscled, keen-eyed men to whom the

dimmest trail was but a blurred, printed page, who read the signs on the ground as a man in the city reads his newspaper, had waited in a cool patience until the sun was up, until the light was strong, and then they had gone out to decipher the legend the night had scrawled along the brink of the creek.

They found where the herd of steers had grazed in the early evening, and knew from the deep imprints of knees and hoofs that they had been startled to their feet, swung hurriedly into line, and driven from the meadow to the stony soil under south cliffs. These were the cliffs which marked the natural fence between the Up and Down and the Bar Diamond. And at their rock-strewn base there was nothing to show if the herd had moved east or west. In that fact, of course, lay the reason that the rustlers had driven them there.

The Up and Down boys, ready as they were at the reading of any blurred sign upon the dim trail, got down from their saddles and for an hour sought to find conclusive proof which way the missing herd had gone. And in the end they had only wasted their time and had found nothing. For the steers had ranged here for ten days now, and there were everywhere broken spears of grass, trampled weeds, that might have been trodden upon after midnight or before. There were the same signs running westward as there were to the east.

"It's no use, boys," said Sherrod. "They took their chances on doing the job on a moonlight night; that's the only chance they took. Somewhere they've hazed the stock on over into the Bar Diamond, headed for the railroad. We'd better move on."

"Then they went through the Pass," grunted Sunny Harper. "We'll pick up the fresh trail there."

So they rode back to the lakes, around the shore, past the cabin with its rotting log walls at which Sherrod gazed frowningly, and onto the mouth of the Pass.

"If they went this way," mused Sherrod, "we'll find the tracks plain enough in the first sandy-floored pocket."

So they passed into the steep-sided canyon which connected the two rangelands. At the first pocket, where there was a floor of moist sand, Sherrod drew rein. But it was plain that no horse, no cow, had gone this way since yesterday.

"There you are," grunted Sunny Harper. "It's the same thing all over again. The stock's gone, we know who took 'em—but where did they go?"

Sherrod said sharply, "There's some other way through these cliffs!"

"There isn't any other way," answered Sunny. "Us boys would know about it."

"Then where are they?" snapped Sherrod.

Sunny Harper shrugged "Don't ask me. Ask Bull Plummer!"

SHERROD touched his spurs. "Come on!" he cried. "We'll make an early call on Bull Plummer anyway. And we'll find the trail on his side of the cliffs. We'll find the cattle there too."

They rode swiftly and made no stop until they came into the Bar Diamond pastures. From here they could see the Bar Diamond bunkhouse. A man was standing in the doorway, another man was drinking at the spring just back of the building, two more were going down to the corral.

"It seems that they've just had breakfast," said Sherrod sharply. "Let's get down there in a hurry. I want to have a look at their horses before they saddle up."

Riding six men abreast, the Up and Down cowboys raced down upon the Bar Diamond. The man in the doorway called something to another man within the house. Simultaneously the two men going down to the corral and the man at the spring came back with quick strides.

"Suspicious cusses," grunted Mute.

"Why shouldn't they be?" returned Sherrod. "Now, you boys keep your mouths shut and your eyes open. This is my game; I'm playing it my way. And if I play it like a fool I know what I'm about."

Bull Plummer was in the doorway now. No word was spoken until the six riders were close enough to him to see his eyes, eyes which were hard and watchful.

"Good morning, Plummer," Sherrod said. "Seen anything of fifty big steers wearing a U and D brand? I've lost that many since last sunset!"

Bull Plummer's eyes held steadily to the eyes of the theatrically dressed cowboy. He saw nothing in them but what Sherrod wanted him to read there, a bit of vexation at his loss. Then the Bar Diamond man's gaze shifted, running like lightning to the stern faces of the men sitting silent and leaving the talking to their boss.

"I don't quite get you, pardner," he said quietly after a brief pause. "You mean—"

"I mean," broke in Sherrod, "what I say! I've lost fifty head in one night and that means close to four thousand dollars gone. Have you seen them?"

Plummer, while Sherrod was speaking, had stepped just outside of the bunkhouse. His men, who had gone out already, were drawn close now and their eyes, too, were as watchful. Four more men came out after Plummer and stood silent by the door.

Already there was a strained atmosphere over the two groups of men, although no belligerent word had been spoken. Every man was ready for the what might come next, the open accusation which might well lie back of the words Sherrod had said. And although there was not a gun in sight excepting the two heavy caliber Colts swinging ostentatiously at Sherrod's hips, there was not a man of them who was not ready upon the instant to go for his gun. The men sitting in seeming carelessness in their saddles, the men lounging by the door, Bull Plummer rolling a cigarette with big, slow fingers, they were all alert.

"I ain't been ridin' range for the Up and Down," said Plummer slowly. "I don't know why you come to me lookin' for your strays."

"That's just it!" cried Sherrod. "Are they strays? If they've just wandered off the range, I've got some one to fire for not attending to my business better. And if some thief has driven them off for me—"

"Go easy there, young feller!" cut in Plummer shortly. "What are you drivin' at? Do you mean you're thinkin' I'm a rustler?"

"I don't know what to think, do I?" retorted Sherrod. "My stock's gone. Where did it go? I'm not saying you had a hand in it, am I? But you might have seen the steers if they did wander off, or one of your men might have seen them. I don't want to stir up trouble."

Plummer's deep laugh cut him short again.

"I guess you better not try to stir up anything!" he snapped. "If you jaspers is lookin' for a fight you come to the right place to get it and—quick! You just say I had a hand in the thing and I'll slap the white face off'n you! Just the same,"—he sneered—"as Ross done the first day you showed up! You better hit the trail back to town, little man. And hit it while the trail's open."

"But look here, Plummer—" and Plummer's men smiled at the quick change in the tone—"I just wanted to ask you to have a look around."

"You've asked your fool question and you've got your answer," answered Plummer. "Now, since you're here, go take your look around. But if you bring them sheepherders of your'n on my place again I'm goin' to sick my men on 'em and drive the last one of 'em off same's I'd drive a pack of kyotes."

"I hope there's no harm done," began Sherrod placatingly.

THEN, surprising his own men as much as he surprised Plummer, he called sharply, "Come on, boys!" and sent his horse racing. It looked like the fool play he had suggested might be expected, but Jim Sherrod knew very well what he was doing. He had waited until not a man of Plummer's outfit was within two hundred yards of the corral and barn and then in a flash he had raced into the corral, flung himself from the saddle when the barn was between him and the bunkhouse, and had run through the big wide double doors.

There were a dozen saddlehorses in the corral and stable. He saw that their hides were dry with not a hair turned by a hard night's riding and knew that if Plummer's men had run off his steers for him they had not ridden these horses. Then he plunged into the barn. A moment later he was back in the saddle.

"Come on, boys," he called to the others as he spurred out of the corral. Then his voice dropped so that only

Sunny Harper and Happy Day heard the words, "We're coming back again—soon!"

They wondered and followed reluctantly as he led the way back toward the Up and Down. He did not tell them what the thing was which he had found. It was merely that every saddle blanket on its peg in the barn was reeking wet with sweat!

VII

NOTHING had been accomplished, yet the days went their swift blue way with no single step taken to the untangling of the puzzle perplexing Jim Sherrod. An incredible thing almost, which any cattle man would have said was a rank impossibility, had actually occurred—fifty big steers had disappeared in a single night and there had been no sign left behind to show the way they had gone, no hint for the keen Up and Down cowboys who sought for a clue day after day.

"I ain't sure," Sunny Harper was led to say at last, "but mebbe that rustler come down in a balloon—like they got in circuses—and carried off them steers. Same as a chicken hawk lifts a squirrel."

They were days of silence in the bunkhouse, days of drawn brows and unspoken speculation. Hard Ross lay upon a bunk at night in the warmest spot in the long room and by day, when the sun shone, outside. The little doctor from White Rock expressed himself with brief and profane emphasis at the iron body he was called upon to care for, granted that a man like Ross didn't have to worry over anything less than a dozen bullets or a shotgun at close range, pocketed his fee, and rode away.

As he took his leave of Sherrod at the corral, the doctor said quietly:

"I'll be back before long."

"You think that, after all, Ross—"

"Who said Ross?" The doctor climbed into his cart. "Looks like his bullets came from the Bar Diamond way! There'll be more lead from the same direction, Mr. Sherrod!"

Yes, there would be more lead, and Sherrod didn't care how soon. But first he must find those steers, find the broad trail they must have left.

As the days ran by and brought no answer, Hard Ross got at last to his feet and walked a few steps about the bunkhouse. Jim Sherrod felt in his heart a growing bitterness toward Dawn Madden. She knew something, and refused to tell. She would rather be dead than have him lay his hand on her arm! But she didn't refuse to live with a stepfather like Madden, who was as deep in the mud as Plummer in the mire, or else had a lot to explain.

Sherrod had ridden several times to the Upper End. He had seen again the strange dwelling place in which Madden lived his solitary, luxurious life. Dawn must have seen him on at least one or two of his rides, but he had caught no glimpse of her. Did she know that Bull Plummer had stolen the fifty steers?

The wet saddle blankets had told Sherrod their story of a hard night's riding. The fresh horses in the corral had told their lie and made certainty more certain. Then, where were they?

"It's enough to make a man go bugs," snorted Hard Ross. "It looked easy to Sherrod and he played it right, and now what happens? Plummer's got his five hundred in cash, he's got as fine a herd of beef cattle as a man ever swung a rope over, and the low-lived thief has got Silver Slippers! It's enough to make a man just ride over and gun him just for fun!"

Silence that agreed met Hard Ross' hard words. Little would have been necessary to send a dozen lean, wrathful cowpunchers swooping down upon the neighboring outfit they believed took and mocked.

Every time Jim Sherrod rode to the Upper End and saw the dugout across the lake, he wondered what part it played. It was Up and Down property, he had a right to storm the thing and tear its secret from it. But, he hesitated. That would look like spite, and what could be gained except annoying a man he didn't like?

And then one day, the thought came to him swiftly that he could use this place as a means of forcing Dawn Madden to speak. He would trump up a charge against Madden. He could instruct his attorney to wring from Dawn's unwilling lips an account of her

lighting the fire which so nearly shone upon the end for Hard Ross. He might get an idea of what he wanted to know.

WITH the thought upon him he rode straight to Madden's place. The man met him at the door.

"Mr. Madden," he said quietly, "I want a word with you on business."

"Pray, then," said Madden, "make it brief."

"I have lost cattle," Sherrod began, but Madden cut him short.

"I haven't stolen them. I'm not interested in them."

"But," went on Sherrod evenly, "you *are* interested. At least you know something of them, of who took them."

"You are accusing me of complicity!" snapped Madden. "If that is all you have to say—"

"It isn't all," returned Sherrod. "And it would be well for you to listen to what I have to say."

"That sounds like a threat!" Madden laughed a short, barely audible laugh which was scarcely more than a writhing back of the thin lips and a harsh grating from the throat.

"I am not making threats," replied Sherrod, coolly. "Still I know who has taken my stock and I'm not making any bones about it. It's Bull Plummer! And you know a great deal about Bull Plummer! I want to ask you some questions, that's all. I want to know if that fire on the night Hawley shot Hard Ross was lighted by your orders."

"It was not," returned Madden.

"Miss Madden lighted it."

"Then hadn't you better ask Miss Madden about it?"

"I shall ask her. Is she in this morning?"

"She is not in this morning."

"May I ask when she will be in?"

"Yes, you may ask. And it's the last question I will answer. She has gone away. She has been away a month. She will, in all probability, be away for a year!"

He slammed the door in Sherrod's face. There was the sound of a heavy bar being dropped into place and Jim Sherrod went away, more puzzled than ever.

So Dawn had gone away. Gone where? No one would know but Madden, and to ask him would be to ask the cliffs standing tall and stony-faced about Madden's home.

"Well, why should she stay in a country like this?" mused Sherrod. "Madden never did a more decent thing in his life than send her out of it."

He turned away from the closed door and swung back up into saddle. He had not said what he had come to say, and the reason did not lie alone in the fact that he had had the door slammed against him. It lay as well in the fact that Dawn Madden was gone.

As had happened so many times before his questioning, frowning eyes now went to the dugout. He wondered, as he always wondered when he saw it, what precious thing lay hidden within. This time on a sudden impulse, he turned his horse from the main trail and rode around the head of the Upper Lake and to the cabin.

Madden had taken a shot at him the last time he had gone there. Madden would be watching him now. So when he came to the cabin door he sat still in the saddle looking upon the outer, crumbling log walls. And his eyes, keen now under the low-drawn brim of his hat, watched the Madden place, half expecting to see the nose of a rifle barrel protruding from a window.

What he did see at the cabin was something which he might have seen a month ago if he had ridden here, or might have altogether missed. It was a soiled bit of paper, showing in a crack between two horizontal logs of the west wall, and looked as though it had been thrust through the chink by someone inside.

"A note for Madden!" was Sherrod's quick thought. "I'm going to tamper with the mails."

He touched his horse with the spur, swung to the side along the cabin wall, snatched the paper as he rode past, and holding it hidden in his palm, turned along the cliffs toward the Up and Down headquarters.

IT WAS not until he had passed out of sight of the eyes which he was sure were watching him that he looked at what he had found. Then his face went white. It was a note, the beginning of

which had been made illegible by exposure, but he could still read the hastily scrawled lines:

To be given to Mr. Jim Sherrod.

Unfolding the paper, he read on:

. . . Plummer was with me. He had me by the throat. He said he'd kill me, kill you and Ross if I didn't tell you to go away. I was going to tell you all I know. Now I'm afraid! They are going to get me out of the way — I don't know where. There is a cave, somewhere, 'way up on the cliffs. The Chinese cook is to bring my food. If you don't get this before then follow him. He will leave at night. And be careful — they would kill you.

Dawn.

And in his heart he had been blaming her! For over a month he had been telling himself that he was a fool not to realize that she was hand in glove with Madden and perhaps Bull Plummer.

And now he sat still in the saddle, his face white, his hand gripping the bit of paper which only a great good fortune had brought to him, a cold fear for her in his heart. She had written that just after he had called to her through the closed door, just after she had called to him, "I have nothing to say. Go away!"

She had gone away, Madden said. Yes, she had gone but with Madden and Plummer driving her to some cave back in the mountains where she could have no opportunity of saying what they feared to have her say. She had found out the thing that Sherrod had found baffling him.

Was she still alive? A month had passed. "The Chinese cook is to bring my food! He will leave at night!"

"Then, tonight I will know!" muttered Jim Sherrod. "If she is still kept prisoner here somewhere in the mountains, then the Chinese still carries her her food. And I am going with him!"

Back at the Up and Down Fancy Jim Sherrod went about his preparations coolly. In the late afternoon, but before the boys had come in, he carefully cleaned, oiled and reloaded his guns. Hard Ross, the only man with him in the bunkhouse, watched him with unveiled interest, making no remarks.

When he had finished, Sherrod put the two heavy revolvers back into their holsters. He made a cigarette with steady fingers, his eyes fixed on his foreman's. For a moment the two men regarded each other searchingly. It was Hard Ross who spoke first.

"The holes in me are feelin' pretty good today, Jim," he remarked. He reached for his tobacco and papers, made and lighted a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I can ride a horse a short ways, say fifteen or twenty mile, as good's I ever done, Jim. My hand's pretty steady, too."

He lifted his big right hand, the fist clenched, the forefinger pointing and squinted along it at a knot-hole in the wall as a man might sight a gun. The forefinger did not waver. Sherrod waited.

"It's your business, Jim," Ross went on. "And I take you to be a man as knows his own business pretty well. But I got my word to say, remember that. I ain't got Silver Slippers back any more'n you got your steers. And—er—" He broke off sharply, his voice full of expression now. "Let me go 'long!"

Fancy Jim Sherrod put out his hand in a hearty grip.

"I'd rather have you than anybody else, Ross," he said simply. "But are you sure that you're in shape?"

"I'm real sure." Hard Ross grinned.

"We're ridin' soon?"

"Before the boys come in," Sherrod told him. "Better look to your guns, Ross. We may need them."

"We're ridin' in the general direction of the Bar Diamond?"

"Not tonight, Ross. But don't let that fool you. I am leaving word with the cook for the boys to be ready for anything that happens. We're going to stir up a little trouble, I think."

JIM SHERROD and Hard Ross went down to the corral and roped a couple of the toughest, most spirited horses of the outfit. Hard Ross grinned at the memory of the many times he had roped Sherrod's horse for him, choosing a gentle one. Now as he watched Sherrod's rope swing far out to fall with a dexterity any cowpuncher would have been proud of, Ross grunted:

"A pretty fool I made of myself playin' you for a tenderfoot and pickin' out a plow horse for you to straddle!"

Sherrod laughed. "I was thankful. I was afraid that you'd give me a wild one to watch the fun. I'd have had to get myself bucked off and—"

Hard Ross looked at him, his eyes filled with regret.

"I wish I'd done it! Honest to gran'ma, I wish I'd done it, Jim! It would almost of made it square with you for makin' a fool out'n me!"

They saddled, mounted and rode slowly toward the Upper End, leading a third horse, and talking of things which did not matter. It was not until they were out of sight of the bunkhouse and the boys upon the other rim of the valley that Jim Sherrod told his foreman what their errand was. At the first mention of Dawn Madden, Ross' brows contracted. He had not forgotten how her action had aided Hawley in his coward's attack. But long before Sherrod had finished his story Ross' expression changed. It softened first, then hardened again with wrath, and his big fist clenched at his side.

"It's time Bull Plummer stretched a good piece of tie rope! Put his dirty hands on her throat, huh? Say, Jim"—his voice was suddenly filled with concern—"you don't reckon . . . it's been a month! You suppose she's all right, huh?"

For a moment Sherrod did not answer.

"We've got to wait for dark, Ross," he said at last. "If they still have her captive and hidden somewhere among these rocks they must still carry her food to her. That means two things: first, that she is not far from Madden's, and second that they will wait for dark."

"We'll hang around and follow anybody we see leavin' the place?" offered Ross quickly.

"Yes, and if we don't see anyone leave, then we'll wait as long as we can. And when we have done that, why then we'll go in and talk things over with Madden himself!"

They left their horses tied in a dense grove at the foot of the climb from the valley to the first of the lakes. From there they proceeded on foot, walking warily. It was quite dark when they reached the lake shore.

"You move over that way, Ross," Sherrod whispered. "Keep to the edge of the water, keep on until you come to the Upper Lake. Hide somewhere near the old cabin and watch."

"And you, Jim?"

"I'm going to watch over Madden's place. If the Chinese goes out tonight one of us ought to see him."

"If he should get by you?" Ross asked. "If I should see him first, then what? Am I to look you up?"

"You're to waste no time!" answered Sherrod. "You're to follow him and bring Dawn Madden back. That's what I brought you for. But I don't think that I am going to miss him! So long!"

So Jim Sherrod went swiftly, silently, to watch over Madden's place while Hard Ross, crouching down in the shadows at the lakeside, peered through the darkness at the cabin and the small cleared rock-floored space about it. An hour passed. Hard Ross, where he sat, felt his eyeballs grow tired of trying to pierce a black wall which every moment grew blacker, thought longingly of the cigarette he must foreswear and solaced himself with a generous nibble at his plug cut. Sherrod, his lean body against a great cedar, watched and waited in growing impatience.

A second hour dragged by, and then a third. Sherrod tiptoed from his hiding place and sought Ross.

"Seen anything? Heard anything?" he whispered.

"No," grunted Hard Ross. "Hadn't we better talk with Madden?"

Sherrod hesitated. "I'd like to," he admitted. "But this is a waiting game, Ross. We might spoil everything. We'll wait another hour."

They did not wait another hour. Sherrod went back to his tree, Ross dropped down to his place in the shadows. And within fifteen minutes something happened—happened, and was noticed by Hard Ross, but was unseen, unheard by Jim Sherrod. The big Chinese had slipped out of the Madden place by some rear exit unknown to Sherrod, had moved stealthily through the trees and had come to the lake shore.

Ross heard him when the Chinese was not twenty steps away. And Ross, holding his breath, his footfall as silent upon the rocky shore as a cat's upon velvet,

followed him. A fierce joy leaped up in Hard Ross' heart. At last he was to do his part!

VIII

JIM SHERROD, growing more impatient as each moment went by, forced himself to wait, telling himself over and over that it was too early to expect anything. And then, before Hard Ross had followed his quarry ten steps, Jim Sherrod, too, was following a quarry.

He did not at first know who it was that had stealthily opened the front door, and stepped out into the darkness. He could see nothing; he could just hear the soft footfall of a man moving guardedly.

"It's the Chinese!" he told himself. "He's going to her—and I'm going with him!"

The man who had come out of Madden's home went slowly at first. He stopped often and Sherrod knew that he was listening, looking, fearing that he might be followed. So, pausing every few steps, he made his way a hundred yards through the brush. Then he stopped dead in his tracks, and for five minutes Sherrod could not tell that he had moved. The Up and Down owner began to fear he had missed the man, that he had slipped away to right or left, noiselessly.

At last the figure, now dimly outlined against the surface of the lake, moved on. In a moment he broke into a run and Sherrod ran after him keeping fifty steps behind. The man swung about the upper end of the lake; for a moment his hurrying form stood out against a star-silvered strip of the lake; then again it was lost in the thick shadows. Jim Sherrod could not be certain that it was not the Chinese cook. It looked a trifle small for him, but he could not be certain.

The man he followed passed on swiftly now, without a stop. Then, suddenly the stealthy step of the man in front disturbed a little stone upon the trail and it had rolled six inches down the trail. The quiet step of the man behind touched the same stone and sent it on its noisy way down the cliffside.

The figure not twenty steps ahead, stopped abruptly. Sherrod stopped as quickly, his nerves taut. Absolute silence held for several minutes during which neither man moved.

And then, again the figure ahead was moving on, so softly that at first Sherrod could not be certain that he heard the almost inaudible footfall upon the hard path. But he was moving—and he was coming back! He was going to make doubly sure that he was not followed.

In the daytime two men could not have met and passed here. There was scant room for one. Jim Sherrod's mind, leaping for a way out, a way to avoid discovery, at first saw none. He could not move back, for if he did his foot might strike another stone, and if he were discovered, what would be the end? It would mean that he had lost his chance to follow this man to Dawn Madden. It would perhaps mean a struggle on the narrow trail and the finish for them both. Both men, locked in a death grip, might go plunging down into the rock-bed of the gorge below and neither man ever know who the other man was.

At last, thinking swiftly, he found the one chance and took it. The broad limb of a tree at his side invited him. He stepped out boldly, bending down, stooping low, clutching it with hands and knees, balanced a moment and then with no sound but the rustling of foliage which was lost in the faint rush of water below, he sat on the limb of the big pine, not two feet from the narrow trail.

He was just in time. He could see the returning figure now, could hear the low breathing, and as the man came abreast of him, only a couple of feet away, he could make out who it was. It was not the Chinese. It was Madden himself.

Madden paused again and stood leaning forward, peering into the darkness swallowing up the downward trail. Sherrod could have shot out a quick hand and plucked him from where he stood. Only for an instant did Madden hesitate, then once again he was hastening downward, back along the way he had come. By the time the echo of his footsteps had died away, Sherrod was certain that Madden had gone nearly back to the cabin.

"He's making sure," Sherrod told

himself again. "He isn't taking any chances that aren't in the game. And he'll come back when he's convinced."

SO HE sat upon his limb, balancing, holding to the branches about him, and waited. In ten minutes, Madden came back, walking swiftly now. He was making what haste he could and throwing caution to the winds, evidently assured that it had been no human foot behind him to set the stone rolling.

"My luck's with me," muttered Sherrod as once more he set foot upon the trail, reaching out easily from his tree. "I know who I'm following now, and it's going to be easier to trail him now that he's making most of the noise."

He jerked off his boots, carrying them in one hand, and hurried on, unmindful of bruises and cuts. He could hurry now, even as Madden was hurrying, and with no grating of leather sole on rock to whisper of his coming.

For fifteen minutes the way led straight toward the top of the Bar Diamond pass, climbing steeply. Then there was a little wider shelf, a sort of natural platform, and pausing here a moment Sherrod could hear Madden's footfalls almost directly above him. For here the trail turned and wound backward along the cliffs, still climbing but leading in an opposite direction, away from the pass.

It was hard clmbing now. Sherrod had to grip at the face of the rock with both hands, fastening his boot straps to his belt to have all his fingers free; had to pull himself up where he had seen the blurred form of Madden go; had to hold his body tight-pressed to the steep walls of granite.

But where Madden had gone he could go, and he made his grim way uncomplaining. If he could only find Dawn at the end of the trail, if all were still well with her, no trail would be too difficult.

At last Madden had come to the top of the cliffs. For just an instant his silhouette was defined against the clear sky, then it was gone again. So quickly was it gone that, for a moment, Sherrod feared the man had fallen down into some gorge upon the other side of the cliff wall.

Sherrod came on swiftly, fearing that if Madden had not fallen at least he was lost to him among the boulders he expected to find strewing the ridge. But though he climbed with what speed he could, he moved with what caution was possible. At length he managed to wriggle up to the spot where he had last seen Madden. Then suddenly he dropped back, lying flat against the rocks.

The leaping flames of a brush fire ahead had startled him, and in one swift glimpse he had seen Madden again. He had seen that the man he had followed was standing upon a boulder upon the south slope of the cliffs, had seen the Chinese, had seen Hard Ross. As background for the tableau leaping into his startled eyes, he had seen the wildest bit of the mountains his eyes had ever rested upon—rugged, high-lifted spires and pinnacles of rocks, fathomless, sheer-walled gorges filled with murky shadows as a crevice with ink.

And he had seen Dawn!

Madden stood upon a hog's-back, a spine of rock cresting the cliffs and of almost knife sharpness and thinness, with a straight drop to the north into the valley of the Twin Lakes, a straight drop to the south into a canyon a thousand feet deep. Here at the top it was a mere distance of twenty feet across the gorge.

It was across the gorge upon a flat surface perhaps a dozen feet square that the fire was burning. The leaping flames showed the yawning mouth of a cave just beyond the level space, and Dawn Madden standing there. It showed a bridge running across the chasm, a bridge of one piece of timber roughly-hewn from a log, not over three inches thick, less than a foot wide. One end of the narrow bridge rested upon the broad rock in front of the cave, the other end lay upon a flat-topped boulder upon Madden's side of the chasm.

Walking swiftly across the timber was the big Chinese cook, carrying a parcel in his hands. Hard Ross, no longer seeking to conceal himself, stood at the brink of the chasm only a few feet from the Chinese and only a few feet from Madden.

Sherrod saw that Hard Ross had his

gun in his hand, that he was ready. Ready for what? Sherrod saw that Madden also had a revolver in his hand, and that he was watching Hard Ross,

And Dawn Madden, seeing them all in the firelight, cried out, saw Sherrod as he rose swiftly a dozen paces behind Madden and threw up his arm, and clapped his hand to her mouth. He could see the look of terror in her widening eyes. He could see Ross move out a little and knew that he was going to call to the Chinese to throw up his hands. He could see Madden jerk up his right hand and knew that he was not going to call out, that he was going to shoot without warning.

IN A FLASH, Jim Sherrod sprang forward and downward, his hands going to Madden's throat, jerking him back to the ground.

"Cover the cook, Ross!" he shouted. "Shoot him if he tries anything! I've got Madden. Don't take any chances now!"

"I've got him covered," Hard Ross' voice floated back to him coolly. "With two guns, Jim. I ain't takin' no chances. But—I'm glad you come along, Jim!"

Madden's sharp cry, choked out of him, rang wildly. A bullet from his revolver winged its way over the top of the cliff on the far side of the gorge. Then Madden found himself suddenly flung backward upon the ground, his gun jerked from his hand. The Chinese, already more than halfway across the shaking bridge, leaped forward as he guessed what had happened behind him. Sherrod saw the parcel fall from the Oriental's hand, saw it drop into the nothingness which yawned hungrily below, and heard Hard Ross' voice booming.

"Up with your hands, Chinee! Quick, or I'll let starlight through you!"

"We've got the drop on them!" was Sherrod's quick thought.

Then he heard Dawn Madden's voice in a terrified scream, saw her snatch up a heavy blanket from the ground, and before he could guess her thought she had flung it over the leaping flames of her brush fire. Another blanket followed and another. It was dark, pitch dark again. He could not see the form struggling in his hands, or Ross or the cook or Dawn.

"The devil!" shouted Hard Ross. "Are you crazy?"

In a flash the advantage had switched. The Chinese was at the girl's side. The narrow bridge lay between them and Ross and Sherrod. Madden was giving Sherrod all the trouble he could handle. A raging anger leaped high in Sherrod's heart.

"She's doublecrossed us, Ross!" he shouted. "Look out!"

Ross yelled back at him lustily: "Can you manage Madden all right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'll watch this little bridge. I reckon they can't get out no other way. And the first one as comes acrost is goin' to get dropped about a million feet into space."

There had come no word from Dawn. But it came now, in a scream:

"I had to put out the fire! Plummer's here! He—"

The scream died. There came a spurt of flame, and a bullet fired from a ledge of rock just above the entrance to the cave sang through the night over Sherrod's head. But he had understood Dawn's scream. He knew the meaning of her cry being strangled. Either the yellow hands of the big Chinese or Plummer's calloused hands or the hands of one of Plummer's men were on her throat. Only her quick action in throwing the blanket on the fire had saved Sherrod, and the words he muttered into Madden's ear were full of menace.

Sherrod dropped to the ground, holding Madden's struggling body close to him. He had Madden's wrists in his iron grip. He bent them back until they came together behind Madden's back. And then, as silently as he could, he dragged Madden with him toward the spot where a moment ago he had seen Hard Ross.

"You cry out," he told Madden, "and there's nothing left for me but to kill you! Be still!"

A little groping brought him to his foreman's side.

"Help me, Ross," he whispered. "We've got to tie him and jam something down his throat so he can't yell. Hurry."

Two belts and a couple of neck-scarfs did the business. Then Jim Sherrod and Hard Ross, standing side by side, close to the end of the rough-hewn plank, stared across the gulf of darkness into deeper darkness and tried to guess what happened a bare twenty feet from them.

"Plummer and that Chinee cook have got her," whispered Ross. "There ain't much chance of their troublin' us over here, but—"

"But," whispered Sherrod, "what's going to happen to her? Are we going to wait here until daylight to find out? There's bound to be some other way out of this. They'll be gone by morning!" He broke off sharply. He did not like to think what might happen to the girl long before morning came.

"I'm going over there to her. It's taking chances, yes. But, man, what chances is she taking!"

NO SOUND came to them now from the far side of the chasm. But they knew that somewhere there Plummer and the Oriental waited and watched. They knew that Dawn Madden's lips had been silenced. Perhaps she had been only gagged—that they could not know.

"I'm goin' across now, Ross," Sherrod was whispering. "I don't think that they'll expect it, so soon."

"I'm behind you," returned Ross quietly. "It's a fool thing but I guess it's the only way. If they jump you as you land throw yourself to the left. I'll shoot to the right. *Sabe?*"

They moved forward. Jim Sherrod, going first, went on his hands and knees until his groping fingers found the end of the plank. And then a quick thought came to him and he stopped.

He knew what one of the men would be doing upon the other side of the gorge, knew so well that it was a flash of inspiration. It was as if he could see the man. Plummer or the Chinese would be standing at Dawn's side, holding her, a rude hand over her mouth perhaps. And the other man? He would be lying stretched out on the ground at the other end of the plank. His fingers would tell him the instant that a man set foot upon it. Sherrod had seen already how the slight bridge trembled and shook under a cross foot.

"Plummer will be the one lying there," thought Sherrod swiftly. "He'd know the second I was crossing. He'd wait until I was halfway and then a quick shove to the end of the board and I'd drop a thousand feet! I'd be walking to my death with my eyes open, like a fool!"

Sherrod drew back, hesitating. He could not help Dawn Madden that way.

"What's the matter, Jim?" whispered Hard Ross. "Can't you find the plank?"

"Yes. Come here."

He drew Ross backward to a safer distance from any other listening ears, then told his thought briefly. Ross swore under his breath.

"That's their game!" he whispered savagely. "The low-down curs! And now what? It's wait until—"

It had been dead-still upon the other side of the gorge. Now, without warning, a revolver barked, and a red spurt of flame split the darkness only to be swallowed up by the darkness again. The whine of a bullet told them that Plummer and the Chinese were watching and listening.

"And we can't shoot back!" groaned Ross. "We might hit her!"

"There's not a chance in a thousand of them hitting us," Sherrod answered coolly. "Here's a puzzle, Ross. What's the answer?"

"There ain't no answer," groaned Ross. "If only she hadn't put the fire out!"

"If she hadn't, Plummer would have put a bullet in both of us," cut in Sherrod. "For a second it was a mighty good thing for us it was dark. Now if we had the light again—" He stopped suddenly. "That's it, Ross! That's the answer! We've got to build another fire!"

"And get picked off while we're scratchin' a match," grunted Ross. "I don't like it."

But Sherrod was already acting on his inspiration. He began groping along the cliffs for what dry brush, what bits of wood and grass he could find. Ross, understanding that he had made up his mind, joined him.

It was slow work, what with the

blackness of the night and the scarcity of any growth here upon the heights. But in fifteen minutes they had collected a goodly pile of combustible stuff and at Sherrod's low-spoken command Hard Ross helped him pile it.

While seeking the material for his fire Sherrod had shaped his plan definitely, studying the ground as he went. Ten feet to the right of the near end of the plank was a big boulder standing close to the edge of the precipice. Moving silently, crouching low, he and Ross made the pile of brush wood just to the right of the boulder, just at the brink of the chasm. Then Ross, grasping the plan, moved as Sherrod directed until he had gone another ten feet beyond the end of the plank, where he crouched down in a little hollow deep enough partly to conceal his body.

Sherrod slipped behind the boulder and, with his body hidden from Plummer and the cook, struck his match. A little dry grass served as a lighter. The flame broke out brightly, and he tossed the burning wisp to his bonfire, slipping back swiftly behind his rock.

THERE came a snarl from across the narrow ravine — Bull Plummer's voice—and Plummer understood. Then two revolvers, Plummer's and that of the Oriental, cracked their warning as two bullets whizzed by the rock behind which Sherrod had withdrawn.

In a moment other dry grass caught fire, the twigs of the dead brush sucked at the twisting flames, and the firelight ran up as if it were following a powder train. A gleam of light cleft the darkness and showed the mouth of the cave. Dawn was not there. She had been thrust back through the entrance to be out of the way.

Plummer stood for a moment in sight, the Chinese at his side. But before Hard Ross could fire both men had leaped a little to the side and the darkness befriended them again.

Now was the time Jim Sherrod had set for his action, an action full of danger but not impossible if he did not loiter. The big boulder against which his fire was growing every second stood just between the leaping flames and the end of the plank, which was still in pitch darkness.

He slipped about the boulder. Hard Ross, playing his part, opened fire at the spot where Plummer and the Chinese cook had disappeared, and succeeded in drawing their fire. And then Jim Sherrod, taking his chance, set his foot upon as perilous a bridge as a man ever sought to travel.

IX

SHERROD crouched low. He found the rough surface of the plank with his hands, half straightened, waited one second until he could see the way across the chasm before him, wavering and unreal. He heard Ross' fire and the shots from the other side, steadied himself, and started.

Ross was shooting with both hands and certainly making enough racket for two men with two guns. There was no reason why Plummer and his Chinese aide should suspect that Sherrod was crossing. He must travel that dangerous way slowly. He must edge onward, mincing step after mincing step as he balanced over the death below. He must go over halfway, until he was at the edge of the spreading circle of light, then in one leap he must reach the far side.

"Good old Ross!" he muttered.

For Ross was still firing like two men, and he was talking now, muttering things to Jim as if Jim were at his side.

"A little more to the right, Jim! . . . Keep down, Jim! . . . Hurt bad, Jim?"

And Jim Sherrod was already nearly halfway across the trembling bridge!

Almost halfway! A little more and he could straigten up and take a swift step into the light and spring to the far side. He would take his chances then, but with the uncertain light, with Plummer and the Chinese driven a little further back by Ross' fire, with the sudden dart he would make, throwing his body sideward into the darkness upon the other side of the cave, he thought that the chances were with him. Another three or four cautious steps and. . . .

There came a shout, a shrill yell of warning — Madden's voice! Madden

had somehow worked the gag out of his mouth.

"Look out!" he shrieked. "Sherrod's on the bridge!"

Sherrod did not know exactly what happened then. He ran—he had to run or a bullet would drop him. He did not know how far he had to go but the far brink did not look eight feet, and as a bullet whizzed over his head he jumped for it—leaped far out, throwing his arms forward, to fall sprawling, to feel his ankles strike upon the edge of the ledge, to know that his body had landed safely.

He drew himself up, twisted to the side. He half-rolled, half-crawled, straightened, and plunged into the shadows. Another bullet had come near him and he did not hear its whining song. For this bullet had not missed and he felt his left arm go nerveless and limp.

Madden had shouted again and again.

Then Sherrod heard running feet, guessed wildly that Madden had freed himself from his rude handcuffs and was rushing upon Hard Ross. He heard Ross cry out. He thought that at last one of the bullets from the other side of the cave had struck the big foreman. Then he knew that Madden and Ross were struggling, swaying upon the brink of the chasm.

Sherrod forgot his own wound.

"He's hurt and Madden has struck him from behind," he thought, and shouted: "Ross! Ross!"

But Hard Ross did not answer. Dimly Sherrod could make out the two forms swaying insecurely upon the edge of the cliff. He dared not shoot, for he could not tell which was Madden, which Ross.

Then again he heard a man cry out, a strangling, terrified scream. He could not tell whether the voice was Ross' or Madden's. And then—then there was only one man on the far side, drawing himself away weakly from the death which had caught the other man's slipping feet. Was it Madden? Was it Hard Ross?

But there was not time for a question now, not even the question of the death of friend or enemy. Sherrod heard the wild scream echoing through the cliffs, heard a body strike and fall and strike again, and already he was braced against a rock, his left arm useless at his side, his right hand gripping his gun and firing at the blurred forms of Plummer and the Chinese. And he was firing slowly, carefully, with no thought of wasting lead.

The two blurred forms disappeared. He could not tell if his bullets had found their target or not. He waited and listened. He heard quick steps, the rolling of a stone. He thought that they were drawing back. And then he called sharply, half afraid of the silence which might answer him:

"Ross!"

And Hard Ross' big voice boomed back:

"All right, Jim!"

Jim Sherrod drew the breath of gratitude deep into his lungs. Ross was all right, Dawn was all right. He was as good as new. And there was nothing left but a little clean fighting, with no odds.

SHERROD felt his wounded arm with firm fingers. No bone was broken; there was only a severe but not dangerous wound through the bulge of the forearm. He picked up the gun he had dropped, jammed it into his holster, gripped the other weapon in his right hand and turned his eyes toward the cave.

And then he saw Dawn Madden coming swiftly toward him, her face deathly white.

"Was it—Mr. Madden who—fell?" she asked faintly.

"Yes!" Sherrod cried. "But step back. The men here haven't gone yet and—"

"They have gone," she said quietly. "Out the back way."

She came on until she was close to Jim Sherrod's side.

"You have been good to me," she said faintly. "You have come to me when I needed you most. And—and I am very sorry—"

"Sorry?" he asked, wondering. "That I came?"

"No, no!" she told him quickly. "If you had not come—" She broke off with a shudder. "It is too hideous to think what might have happened!"

"Then you must not be sorry for anything," he said gently.

"But I must tell you, I must try to tell you, that I am sorry and ashamed that—that I said I would rather be dead than have you touch me!"

And suddenly she reached out and, lifting her hands, laid them upon his shoulders.

"I never understood," she told him. "How could I know such things? That there were men living whom another man must not think of mercifully? That there were men like Plummer—and Mr. Madden!" She whispered again: "You have been good to me, Jim Sherrod."

His hands had crept upward, closing about hers on his shoulders, drawing them down. "Poor Dawn," he said softly.

"Take me away with you," she went on quickly, with a frightened glance into the darkness about them. "I think I have nearly gone mad! I would go mad. You will take me away with you, won't you?"

For an answer, he held her close. . . .

There were two trails down, Dawn said. One led its steep way to the Bar Diamond, the other was the one Sherrod and Ross had followed tonight.

"We must hurry," she insisted. "Don't make me talk now, will you? I have so much to tell you, but you will let it go until we get—" She hesitated and Sherrod fancied that the word "home" was trembling on her lips. "Until we get down into the valley," she concluded. "To the Up and Down."

She had slipped out of Sherrod's arms and stood leaning against the rocks, staring downward. He knew that her thoughts were following Madden's wild plunge. But she had not mentioned Madden's name after being assured that it was he who had fallen. He sensed that after she had told her story she would never mention his name again. He wondered if she would discard the Madden name now, and believed she would.

"Before we leave," she said bitterly, "I want you to go in and see the place in which I have stayed for a month. There is a lantern. I will wait here."

Sherrod went swiftly to the cave, found the lantern and lighted it. Hard Ross had come to his side.

"Hurt bad, Jim?" he whispered.

"No," Sherrod returned. "And there's no reason why she should know I was hurt at all."

Ross nodded, and the two men glanced about the cave. It was a rock-walled chamber some twenty feet deep, half that wide. There was no chair or table; the bed had consisted of the three blankets which Dawn had thrown upon the fire. There was no rug, no single thing to give a touch of comfort.

"And they made her stay here a month!" Ross cried. "Poor little lady! What is it they were afraid of her tellin', Jim? About the cattle, huh?"

"We'll know soon, Ross." Sherrod blew out the lantern.

The foreman's hand was on his shoulder. Ross was whispering urgently.

"As soon's she begins, Jim, you'll ask her if she knows anything about Silver Slippers, won't you?"

"You saw?" Dawn asked as they rejoined her. "It's nearly driven me crazy. I was half starved. They gave me food and water only at night, and then not enough of either. And now, we must hurry before it is too late!"

"Too late?" repeated Sherrod.

"Yes! Come. I will tell you everything when we get down."

SO THEY made their way back across the narrow bridge.

"Draw the plank over this side," Dawn said. "They can't follow us this way if you do. We must hurry on. I am afraid—"

"Of what?" asked Sherrod.

"I'll tell you when I tell everything," she answered. "And now, won't you hurry? Please?"

Ross had already drawn in the plank. They began the trip down and found the horses where earlier in the night they had tethered them. Sherrod used one hand to help Dawn to the back of the animal they had brought for her, and they rode swiftly to the Up and Down Ranch. It was with the first dim streaks of the morning in the sky behind them that they rode up to the home corral.

Only then did Dawn speak again.

"While you unsaddle," she said to Sherrod as she slipped to the ground,

"let Ross hurry on and wake the rest. I think you'll want all of your men to hear what I have to say."

A dozen hands were ready to make the girl comfortable, when Sherrod led her into the bunkhouse. The best chair was dragged forward, dusted and examined for a treacherous, broken leg, odds and ends of clothing and general range duffel were thrust hastily out of sight under bunks. Men sought and donned coats to mark their respect and had equally little care as to ownership or fit of the garment into whose sleeves they thrust their arms. And Dawn Madden, smiling at them a little wanly, thanking them softly, dropped wearily into her chair and began her story.

"It has been going on a long, long time," she said. "For years, I think. And, though I suspected Plummer I never suspected the whole truth until that night when I made the fire which nearly cost Ross his life.

"Mr. Madden"—they all noted that whenever she mentioned him she called him "Mr. Madden"— "had me build the fire. I know now that Plummer told him to do it. Plummer was at the house late that afternoon. I heard them mention Hawley, and Silver Slippers, Ross. I did not think much about it at the time, because I didn't understand. I know now that Mr. Madden had me start the bonfire because he was afraid to do it himself, afraid that someone would shoot him. I don't know whether he was afraid of Ross or of Plummer."

"Of Plummer?" asked Sherrod.

"Yes. He and Plummer have been side by side in all this thing, and yet I think that they distrusted each other. I know that more than once they have quarreled. I think they hated each other. It required a great deal of mutual danger to make them sure of each other.

"Anyway, I made the fire. I saw Hawley's attack upon Ross. I saw Mr. Sherrod shoot Hawley. I heard Mr. Madden refuse to allow a wounded man to be brought into his house. I should have told everything then, but actually I knew nothing. I had only my suspicions. I was terribly nervous and I wanted time to think. Then, in the early morning, when I came back I came unexpectedly upon Plummer and Mr. Madden. I overheard what they were saying and I knew that during that same terrible night they had driven off fifty head of Up and Down cattle. I *knew* then that what I had suspected was true. They were cattle thieves! And I learned what they had done with the stolen stock."

Every man there leaned a little closer toward her, every eye brightened. There was a long score to settle, and it began to look like the time for settlement was near.

"I wanted to run back to Mr. Sherrod in the front room and to tell him." Dawn went on. "But they heard me. Plummer caught me and dragged me back; Mr. Madden threatened me. Then I heard Mr. Sherrod asking for me. I heard what Mr. Madden told him. I heard him come to the door of the room where Plummer was watching over me. Plummer had his big hand on my throat. He whispered that if I did not send Mr. Sherrod away he would throw open the door and shoot him down—that he would kill Ross—that I would be forcing him to it. And because there was nothing left to do, I sent Mr. Sherrod away!"

SHE turned to Sherrod and addressed him directly now.

"I knew then, with their secret in my hands, they would not again let me have an opportunity to get word to you. I feared they would do just what they did do. So in the little time I had while Plummer and Mr. Madden were in the hallway, talking in low whispers, I ran to my desk and wrote the note you found last night."

"You slipped it between the logs of the old cabin as you went by?" asked Sherrod.

She nodded. "I knew that Mr. Madden never went near the old cabin in the daytime and I felt that there would be little danger of him seeing it there. I hoped that you or one of the men would find it. It was the only thing I could do. And now for the thing I learned! I must tell it quickly; if you can come to the place before they do you will find your cattle there—every head. Oh, it was such a simple thing!"

She paused a moment. Then, her big gray eyes upon Jim Sherrod, she said:

"I could have told you there at the Upper End, but I was afraid for you and Ross! We came right by the place; I knew that if I told you you would go to it alone, just you two. I was afraid that you might find Plummer already there and his men with him. I wanted you to come here first, to get all of your men to go with you. I am afraid that things have come to a desperate point. When you know all that I have to tell you it will be as if there were a rope around Bull Plummer's neck, a rope around the neck of nearly every one of the men taking his pay! They are not the kind to give in now without a fight."

Then she told them the last word of her story. The men looked from her to one another, their eyes widening.

"An' we never guessed," exclaimed Hard Ross. "We'd oughta guessed it a year ago!"

Ten minutes later Fancy Jim Sherrod, with nine men at his back, was again riding the trail to the Upper End. Every man was well-armed, every man stern-eyed and ready for what might lie hidden by the new breaking day.

"And me," Hard Ross grunted with vast satisfaction, "I'm goin' to ride home on Silver Slippers, the old son-of-a-gun!"

The sun was up, the lakes glistening with the fulfilled promise of the new day. The cowboys, riding swiftly, came to the Upper End. Fancy Jim Sherrod, still a horse's length in the lead, drew rein just before he came to where the old cabin stood close to the lake shore. As if at a spoken command his men stopped with him.

"Boys," said Sherrod, a little sternly, "I don't know what I'm leading you into this morning. I don't know whose saddle may go home empty. If any man of you dislikes the job, now is a good time to go back!"

He waited a moment. The cowboys' eyes spoke their answer. Sherrod looked from the first to the last of them.

"Thank you, boys," he said quietly. "But listen a little, first. This is my game! I am playing it my way. And if any man of you is going to try to take it upon himself to say what shall be done, I don't want him. You are to do what I say or go back now!"

Still they made no answer, still their eyes held steadily to his.

"All right, then," he concluded curtly. "Now, stay where you are and keep your eyes open until I ask for you. Ross—Harper—Happ, you come ahead with the crowbar and axes."

As their names were called they urged their horses to Sherrod's side. Reaching the old log cabin, he threw himself from the saddle.

"Make short work of it, boys," he commanded. "Try the door first. It's lined on the inside with sheet-iron, but I think we can smash it off the hinges."

Then they fell to their work with a will. Bar and ax struck through the rotting planks and rang against the iron wall. In a little while they had torn the heavy padlocks from their chains, twisted and broken the thick staples, wrecked the hinges, and the way was open. The door fell noisily.

"Now," said Sherrod, leading his horse through the narrow opening, "come ahead. But no matter what we run up against don't start anything until I say so!"

His first glance into the cabin told him that Dawn had made no mistake. The floor underneath was like the ground out in front, hard rock strewn with flinty bits of granite. The walls, three of them, were of sheet-iron. But against the cliffs there was no wall! There was just a yawning hole into the rock through which three big steers might have passed abreast. There was just a sort of tunnel leading—where?

X

SHERROD was again in the saddle. He had ridden through the battered-down door, and on through the tunnel, and a cry of amazement broke from his lips. He was on the rim of a small valley, some hundred yards long. The cliffs rose straight about it on all sides, bare, barren, steep. There was nothing but rock and scant, drying, torn brush here—no grazing land for cattle. But there was straw; there were long troughs where stock could be watered; there was every sign that a large herd had fed here recently.

"No wonder we never found this

place," grunted Hard Ross. "Look up there, Jim! A man could never climb up anywhere from the outside so's he could look down on it."

"And old Madden doin' the foxy stunt of buildin' that old cabin slam up against the hole in the cliffs," supplemented Sunny Harper. "Think of him doin' that more'n twenty years ago, and workin' his little old game off and on all that time!"

Ross' quick eyes were seeking but not finding Silver Slippers. "Anyway, Plummer's been here ahead of us and has hazed the stock on out," he said. "There must be another way out."

"Through the old rock and log corrals at the upper end of the Bar Diamond!" cried Happy Day. "He's crowded 'em on through there."

"Come on!" called Sherrod. "They haven't much of a head start on us! But keep your eyes open. Plummer will know we're trailing him this time. They'll be looking for us."

They rode hastily through the hidden valley, but had gone only half of the way to the narrow exit five hundred yards away when given leaden assurance that Plummer was looking for them. A rifle broke the stillness with its snapping bark, and the horse ridden by Mute Adams screamed and came down with a broken leg. Mute swore, disentangled himself from his stirrups and rolled out of the way. Before he had ceased swearing, both Sunny Harper and Happy Day had thrown their rifles to their shoulders and had fired back at the shaking shrub and little puff of smoke hanging over the mouth of the exit. Then there was a sudden, deep silence.

"Just a sharpshooter, more to signal to Plummer than anything else," decided Sherrod. "Sunny, you and Happy ride up in front with me, just the same. Take a shot at anything you see moving."

Again they swept on, Mute Adams running after them on foot, after firing a swift shot to put his mount out of agony. Little John thoughtfully reined in a moment, Mute climbed up behind the saddle and the two of them clattered along noisily in the wake of the race.

Where the way narrowed to the width of a small room, Sherrod called to them to let him go on ahead. They remembered their promise and allowed him the required ten feet he wished to proceed them. A narrow trail followed, leading its winding way through a steep canyon, climbing gradually, then dropping swiftly.

A little later they rode through a clump of trees, through a rude gate hidden by the trees and into the rock corrals. Here a broad trail led unmistakably across the Bar Diamond, and toward the broken country beyond. The fifty head of steer had gone that way and not over a couple of hours ago. It was a plain trail.

"Think of it!" muttered Hard Ross. "We had 'em so scared all the time that they had to keep them fifty head in that little valley! It musta took a powerful lot of hay!"

"I think our way is marked plain enough for us now," said Sherrod thoughtfully. "Plummer chased down here as soon as he knew that Dawn Madden would tell her story. He got his men busy; they put every hoof on the run. There is only one thing which Plummer could do then. He'd have the stock run back into the broken country, he'd have his men scatter them and leave them. It'll be a week's work for us bunching them and—"

"Look!" whispered Sunny Harper.

FURTHER down the valley, riding slowly toward the Bar Diamond headquarters were seven men, Bull Plummer at their head.

"I thought so!" muttered Sherrod. "They've scattered the steers and have come back the roundabout way. And now what?"

"Now," spat out Mute Adams who remembered a horse with a broken leg, "it just makes 'em come acrost!"

"Go easy there, Mute!" commanded Sherrod angrily. "You take orders from me, understand? Don't you see that they are ready for trouble? Three of them are carrying rifles and all are armed. Why, man, it would take just about two minutes for a dozen saddles to be running empty! I don't want any wholesale killing this morning—if there is any other way."

The Bar Diamond men had bunched a little. Plummer was now riding with a man on each side of him, and they were coming on more slowly, and heading straight for the stable. Sherrod measured the distance with his eyes. He saw that his party was a fraction nearer the Bar Diamond cluster of buildings.

"Come on!" he shouted suddenly. "Keep the barn between us and them. We get under cover first. Then we'll see what Plummer's got to say."

He touched with his spurs, leaned low in the saddle and shot ahead toward the home corrals. His men, a few yards behind him, came racing after him. In a body they reached the corral with the big barn standing between them and the clatter of Plummer's party. They drew rein, heard a curse from Plummer, knew that he, too, had stopped.

"What you fellers want?" Plummer was shouting. "I told you the next time you showed up on Bar Diamond property I'd chase you off."

Sherrod swung from his saddle, left his horse with dragging reins and stepped out from behind the barn.

"You boys keep under cover," he ordered, his voice carrying distinctly to Plummer. "This is just between Plummer and me. If Plummer's men keep out of it let them go. It's just Plummer we want. If they are fools enough to cut it you boys can pick them out of their saddles! Steady now, Mute! Not a shot until they start it. Then give 'em lead!"

He had walked out into plain sight. Hard Ross groaned a little, took a step to follow, saw that every man of the Up and Down outfit was ready to forget his promise and go on after Sherrod. Then, his voice hard, he said sharply:

"Do what he says! He knows what he's doin'. But Sunny, you and Happy get them rifles of yor'n ready! Watch them two men on each side of Plummer. If they make a pass you boys get 'em first."

"Stop there, Sherrod!" It was Bull Plummer's voice. "Stop or I'll drop you!"

Plummer's gun was in his hand. Jim Sherrod's were in their holsters. Jim Sherrod's hands were swinging at his sides. And still he came on.

"You men," he shouted to Plummer's gang, "keep out of this! I don't want you! You can go—get out of the country for all I care and save your necks another year or so. Plummer, you keep your gun down! I've got something to say to you."

"Say it quick then!" boomed Plummer, "or I'll kill you!"

"You won't kill me," replied Sherrod. "You'll never get the chance and you know it. I knew that you were a thief all the time, Plummer. I think you are a coward too. Now sit still and listen. I want back every head of those fifty steers! I want you to take your men and drive them back into the Up and Down. I want that five hundred dollars I let you cheat me out of. I want seventy-five dollars a head for every cow that has been lost to the outfit for a year. Then I want you to get out of the country!"

"You want!" snarled Plummer. "Why, you—you cussed little dandy, I could—"

There came a sudden cry from one of Plummer's men, a man who had been at the rear and who now first saw Jim Sherrod clearly.

"It's Fancy Jim Sherrod from Painted Rock! Plummer, you fool, drop your gun!"

But into Plummer's eyes had flared a leaping rage.

"You sneak!" he thundered.

THE rest happened like lightning. The men at Plummer's right and left, as if electrified, sent their mounts leaping to right and left. Plummer's gun was jerked up. Plummer fired, the bullets pouring from his weapon almost in a steady stream of lead.

Jim Sherrod seemed to fall, and only an eye as quick as light could have told that he had dropped to his knee and sideward to the ground just before the first shot. As he went down his right hand had sped to his hip; his gun was in his hand. He fired once and was back on his feet again. He fired again, then jammed his gun back in its holster even before Plummer's heavy body struck the ground.

For a long moment there was no sound save the creak of saddle leather,

the jingle of bit chains and spur chains. Then the man who had cried to Plummer that it was Fancy Jim Sherrod, rode a little forward and threw his gun down.

"Plummer was a fool," he said. "I told him to drop his gun."

"Plummer isn't dead!" said Jim Sherrod swiftly. "Pick him up, some of you men. Lay him in the shade by the corral there."

"You mean you missed?" gasped the man who had thrown down his gun. "That close and you didn't kill him? Say, what's happened to you, Fancy Jim?"

Hard Ross was the only one who fully understood Sherrod's answer.

"Maybe the light was in my eyes," he said coolly. "If he is alive now he can thank Dawn for it!"

Jim Sherrod had played his game his way and the fight was over. Slowly revolvers went back into their hidden places, rifles were laid over saddles, and two men, swinging down, lifted Bull Plummer and carried him to the shade along the corral fence. They saw that the light had not been too bad for Sherrod's bullets to find right and left shoulder, and to put Plummer where his nerveless hands could no longer hold a revolver.

"There's just one thing, Jim," Hard Ross was saying. "While we're here—"

"Silver Slippers?" cut in Sherrod quickly. "I haven't forgotten her, Ross." He turned to two of Plummer's men. "Where is Ross' mare?" he demanded.

"She's a devil!" grunted one man shortly. "What a man wants with the likes of her—"

"She's the finest little mare ever put a clean foot on a dirty range!" flared up Hard Ross angrily.

The man shrugged. "Plummer was crazy about her," he retorted. "He always was crazy about a pretty horse, same as some men about a pretty woman. He made Hawley turn the trick and paid him han'some for it. And a lot of good it did Plummer. While he blame near killed her he never rode her more'n seven jumps at that."

"Plummer—near killed Silver Slippers!"

Hard Ross' voice was suddenly so low that the man nearest him hardly heard it. But Plumber, lying against the corral fence turned quick, widening eyes upon Ross, for Plummer had heard and he had understood the emotion making the low tones husky.

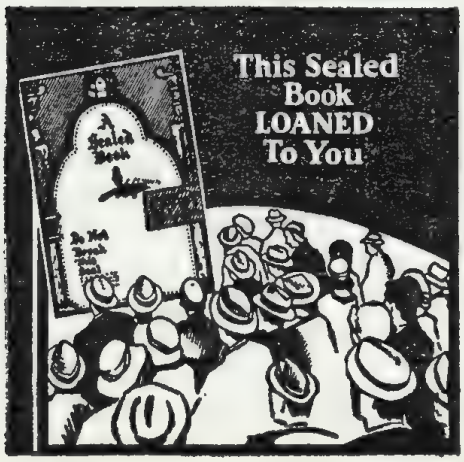
"Go look at her." The man offering the information laughed. "You'll find her hide pretty near cut to strips—not with a spur, seein' he couldn't stick on her long enough to use one—but with a whip! And when he was tired beatin' her and she was all trembly in them thin legs of her'n she'd whirl and try to beat his head off with her hoofs."

"Where is she?" snapped Hard Ross, his lean fingers sinking deep in the man's arm.

"I didn't touch the dirty outlaw," the man snarled. "She's in the stable."

Ross flung him away and strode toward the stable, throwing the corral gate wide open and leaving it open. Sunny Harper, standing near the stable, opened the double doors. And Silver Slippers, her dainty silken hide cut with

[*Turn page*]



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SAN JOSE CALIFORNIA

the merciless bull-whip which had worn deep into her delicate body and had never reached the unbroken spirit, flashed her eyes wide with terror and hatred, her nostrils distended, her fine ears pricked up, her proud head lifted high upon an arched neck.

"Silver Slippers!" cried Hard Ross, his voice breaking.

But she did not see him, she did not hear now the voice she loved. She saw the open corral gate, scented liberty with her flaring nostrils, and flashed through.

Then suddenly she saw Bull Plummer against the corral fence—and she remembered.

"Look out! She's a killer!"

PLUMMER saw and tried to draw back, his eyes full of terror. But Silver Slippers struck, struck once, hard and mercilessly, with her forefeet, wheeled, shot out her hoofs unerringly. And then Silver Slippers was gone, her racing blood leaping, speeding back home, and Bull Plummer had paid his long score. . . .

The missing steers once more grazed on the Up and Down, the boys stood out at the corrals smoking and talking quietly, and Hard Ross in the stable, his eyes tender, was putting liniment into the cuts upon Silver Slippers' shiny coat. At the bunkhouse door Fancy Jim Sherrod and Dawn were standing and Sherrod was looking down into the girl's upturned face.

"Hard Ross has told me all that happened when you came up with Bull Plummer," she was saying, softly. "I know why you didn't kill him. I know why you risked your life, just wounding a man when you might have shot him dead, a man who was even then seeking your death. For Ross told me what you said when they asked you why you spared him!"

Sherrod turned his eyes to the line of willows following the crooked wanderings of the valley creek.

"You should never have come in touch with a life like this, nor with a man like me," he said. "It is a hard life. It makes hard men. If in some little thing you can feel that I am not the brute you thought—"

"You are the kind of man this country needs!" she cried. "Today another man than you might have brought about the deaths of many men. You might have killed Plummer—justly. And you spared him. I have seen that you can be hard when there is the need. I have seen that you can be gentle, very gentle with a horse, with a woman—"

Jim Sherrod turned back to her quickly.

"Dawn," he said. "Dawn—play fair with me, Dawn!"

"Play fair with you?" she asked, puzzled.

"I mean," he told her, "that you mustn't look at me like that unless—"

"Unless?" she repeated, challengingly, her voice steady, her eyes steady upon his.

She had lifted her head a little and held herself erect, her chin raised slightly, her deep gray eyes low-lidded and cool. And yet, despite the calmness of her attitude, slowly her face went crimson.

Again they were silent. But now the silence was not like that that marks the coming of the dusk, but rather that glorious still prelude to a golden daybreak.

"Say, Harpie," Happy Day was saying thoughtfully, "ever notice that look in old Ross' eyes when he's alone with Silver Slippers and don't know anybody's lookin' at him? Just like a man with the only woman."

"Look up to the bunkhouse," Sunny Harper chuckled. "At old Fancy Jim! Don't it sorta remind you of the way Ross looks at Silver Slippers, huh?"

Well, after all, as Hard Ross had said:

"There is just one thing in the world as counts!"

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

BUCK PETERS, RANCHMAN

A Hopalong Cassidy Novel by CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Sheriff Beam was a man of few words, but he certainly knew the meaning of "intuition" when he went on the trail of a drygulcher!

The Deputy and the Dictionary

By MONTE LONG

SHERIFF GEORGE BEAM was a big man, in his early thirties, and he had been the Law in Cactus County for five years. They had been turbulent years, for this region bordering on the Bad Lands was a wild one and only by big fists and gunsmoke were unwelcome citizens convinced they had better move on. Sheriff Beam didn't like the outlaws who drifted into his territory and he made that quite clear to all of them.

The big lawman's body bore the scars of old bullet wounds, but the men who had fired those shots hadn't lived to regret Beam's recovery. Now, as he sat in his office in the cowtown of Lonely Mesa, the sheriff found he had a problem that could not be met with his usual direct and more-or-less-violent way of handling a situation. It called for tact and discretion and Beam was no diplomat.

"Did you ever have diplopia?" Deputy Bert Long asked, glancing up from the book he was reading and looking at the sheriff. "It is double vision of a single object, especially when constituting a disorder of the sight."

"No," said the sheriff resignedly. "I had scarlet fever and chicken pox when I was a kid, but not what you just said."

Bert Long was Sheriff Beam's problem. The lean, wiry deputy had worked with the sheriff for five years and proved a good man in a fight or a tight spot—that is, until Long had bought that dictionary three months ago. Ever since then, Long had spent every possible moment studying words and their meanings. Beam didn't object to that as much as he did to Long insisting that his boss must share his new-found knowledge.

Long had started with the A's and shared his discovery that an aardvark was an African ant-eating, burrowing mammal. In the three months that had passed since then Long had gone slowly and, in Beam's opinion, painfully through the A's, quoting the definition

of every unusual word that he discovered. He had continued on through the B's and C's and was now working on the D's. Beam was willing to admit it was giving him a bad case of delirium tremens without even the excessive and prolonged use of alcoholic liquors.

"Well now," exclaimed Long as he continued reading, "did you know that diplosis is the increasing of the chromosome number by the fusion of two haploids sets in syngamy, Sheriff?"

"Two hoptoads set in what?" the sheriff demanded dazedly.

"Not hoptoads." The deputy looked scornfully at Beam. "Haploids!"

"What does that mean?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know," said Long. "I haven't reached the words under H yet."

THAT was what made the whole thing all the more maddening, in the sheriff's estimation. If Long ran across words he did not know under the definition of a word, he refused to look them up until he reached the place where they would be found in the dictionary. He read it as he would a novel, and was afraid that if he looked ahead it would give away the plot.

Since Long had only reached the D's in three months, the sheriff had a feeling it would be a long time before he learned the meaning of haploids. However, George Beam felt he could wait bravely without even feeling his great loss.

To the sheriff's relief and the deputy's complete indifference, a tall, lean man stepped into the office now. The new arrival was dressed in range clothes and had gray hair and a gray mustache. He was Carse Paxton, owner of the largest ranch in Cactus County.

"Morning, Carse," said the sheriff, nodding to a vacant chair. "Set and rest awhile."

"What have you done about it?" Paxton demanded, as he dropped into the chair.

"Dipterous, having two wings or winglike appendages," Long said, without looking up from the dictionary.

"About what?" asked the sheriff, completely ignoring his deputy.

"You mean you don't even know?" The owner of the Horseshoe outfit glared at Beam in amazement and swiftly rising anger. "I thought you were a good lawman, George. But now it certainly doesn't look like it!"

"Dirdum," said Long. "Uproar, tumult, a scolding."

"What in blazes is the matter with him?" Paxton glared at the deputy.

"A dilettante's dilemma of dilatory diligence," said the sheriff, dryly. "What is it I'm supposed to know, Carse?"

"That Dan Marshall has been drygulched and murdered," said Paxton. "Found his body lying beside the road as I was riding into town a little while ago."

"Dan Marshall!" snapped Beam. "Any idea who killed him?"

"Of course not," said Paxton. "There was no sign of anyone around who might have done the shooting. But I'm surprised you didn't know about it before this. Just goes to show that you are slipping, Sheriff!"

Bert Long sighed and snapped the dictionary shut. From his expression it was obvious that the deputy felt if the owner of the Horseshoe kept on talking to the sheriff that way, Paxton would hear some words that were not even in the dictionary.

"Why should I know about it?" Beam rose to his feet and stood glaring at Paxton. "I didn't discover Marshall's body. You did, Paxton! And if you had as much sense as a billy goat you would have told me about it in a hurry, instead of ranting around about what the Law doesn't know! Where is the body now?"

"Why, I left it lying at the side of the road about two miles outside of town," said Paxton, all of the bluster suddenly leaving him. "Thought you wouldn't want it moved until you had a chance to look it over and read sign."

"You showed some sense in that," the sheriff said.

"I'll get our horses," Long said, heading for the door and disappearing outside.

"You've been doing a lot of talking about my slipping because I didn't know Dan Marshall was killed," Beam said, glaring at Paxton. "Something I couldn't have known unless the dead man sent me a spirit message or some-

thing. But have you stopped to figure that you're in a tight spot, Paxton?"

"What do you mean?" Paxton looked at the sheriff in surprise.

"Marshall was your nearest neighbor, the owner of the Flying M," Beam said. "And you two never did get along. You were always quarreling about something, from water rights to missing stock. If you lost a dogie you figured Marshall was stealing your critters, and he acted the same way about you."

"He was a hard man to get along with," said Paxton.

"Sure," said the sheriff. "And so are you. For all I know, you might have drygulched Marshall yourself!"

"That's a lie!" roared Paxton. "I didn't have a thing to do with it! I tell you I found his body lying at the side of the road. Don't try to pin this killing on me as an easy way out of it, Sheriff. I won't stand for it. It is up to you to get the guilty man, and do it fast!"

"All right," said the sheriff in a milder tone. "I'll get him, even if he happens to be you!"

BEAM glanced out through the door and saw that Deputy Long had their horses ready. Long sat in the saddle of his roan holding the sheriff's bay by the reins.

Across the street, a big, husky man wearing range clothes but no hat pulled up at the hitching-rail in front of the saloon and swung out of saddle. He wore two guns in his holsters.

"Now, what is Willard Spencer doing in town?" said Beam softly, as he and Paxton stepped outside. "And what became of his hat?"

"I've got a lot of political influence in this country," Paxton said, ignoring what Beam had just said. "You better get the man who killed Marshall and do it fast, or you'll no longer be holding office after the election next month."

Beam didn't bother to answer as he walked to his horse. Long handed him the reins of the bay and the sheriff swung into the saddle. He glanced at Paxton, who had stepped out on the plank walk and stood there glaring at him.

"Along which road leading out of town did you find the body?" Beam queried the rancher. "North or south?"

"North," Paxton answered.

Beam nodded as the two lawmen rode away, heading for the road at the north end of the town. The big man across the street had gone into the saloon.

"I see Willard Spencer is back," Long offered as the deputy and the sheriff rode side by side. "And you told him to stay out of this county, Sheriff. That's one gunman who just won't listen to reason."

"Reckon I can convince him when I get around to it," said the sheriff. "Spencer is smart though. He has a reputation of being a tough hombre, an outlaw, but no one has been able to prove much of anything about him. When I ordered him to keep out of this part of the country about a year ago, he left without even arguing about it."

"Un-huh," said Long. "But he's back now, and I'm wondering why. Can't be because he just couldn't bear no longer seeing our beaming faces." The deputy sighed. "Sure sorry I left my dictionary back at the office. I'd like to look up a few more words."

"Your loss is my gain," the sheriff said dryly.

They rode swiftly northward, and finally discovered the body lying at the side of the road. They were too experienced to ride close to the dead man and thus have their horses blot out any tracks that might be there in the thick dust that covered the road.

The two lawmen swung out of their saddles and left their horses ground-hitched in the shade of a tree a short distance away. The morning sunlight was hot. They walked closer and studied the corpse. Dan Marshall had been a thin, tall middle-aged man. He had been shot in the back and through the heart.

"Fell off his horse here when the bullet got him," Long said. "From the tracks, the horse headed off the road and on toward those hills over there."

"Tracks of two horses here," said the sheriff. "The second horse stopped while the man riding it dismounted. Left the horse ground-hitched. See the marks where the reins dragged on the ground, Bert?"

"Sure," said Long. "I can read other things beside a dictionary."

"That's good to know," said Beam. "I didn't believe it until now." He studied the terrain around him and his gaze lingered on a big boulder at the opposite side of the road and a little farther north. "Figure the drygulcher must have been waiting behind that rock and shot Marshall in the back after the owner of the Flying M rode by."

"Must have been Paxton's horse that stopped," said Long. "If it had been the drygulcher he would have ridden out from behind the big rock—but there are no hoofprints coming from that direction."

"See what you can find on the body," Beam said, as he walked toward the big boulder—a boulder that was high and wide enough to conceal a horse and rider. "I'll look around here."

A TREE was growing behind the boulder, about ten feet away from the rock. The sheriff saw where a bullet had plowed into the tree at about the height of a standing man's head.

"Looks like Marshall fired one shot before he died," Beam muttered, and then he raised his voice. "See if Marshall's gun has been fired, Bert."

"It has," the deputy called back. "Found it lying beside him on the ground, like it dropped out of his hand. One cartridge has been fired. Looks like Marshall took one shot at the drygulcher, then tried to get away and got shot in the back."

"Right!"

The sheriff then spied a bit of paper that had been crumpled into a ball and tossed into the brush. He picked it up and unrolled it. It was a terse, pencil written note.

"He will be riding into town Thursday morning," the sheriff read. "A tall man mounted on a white-faced sorrel. I expect you to earn the five hundred I paid you for the job. So do it."

The note was unsigned. Sheriff Beam rolled it up and thrust it into a pocket of his vest.

"So that's it," he concluded. "Someone hired the drygulcher to down Marshall. Wonder if it was Paxton?"

A thought struck the sheriff then. He started searching and finally found what he was seeking. It was a battered Stetson, with a bullet hole in the peak of the crown. The hat had been thrust in between two small rocks where it was not easy to see unless someone had been looking for it. The initials "W. S." were burned in the inner band of the hat.

"Willard Spencer," said the sheriff. "This must be his hat. Sure is a cautious gent. Guess he was afraid somebody would spot the bullet hole that Marshall put in the hat and get suspicious. Said 'somebody' being me or Long."

Beam walked over and told his deputy what he had discovered and handed Long the note. The deputy read it and then looked intently at the paper on which the note was written.

"This is a sheet torn from a tally book," Long said. "See those red-and-blue lines. Marshall was carrying a tally book in his pocket and it looks like this is a page from that book."

"Let's see," said the sheriff, reaching down and pulling the book out of Marshall's back pocket. It was the type ranchers use in checking on stock and for jotting down operating costs.

He opened the book and found a place where a sheet had been torn out. The torn edge left in the book and the top of the note fitted together.

"You're right, Bert," Beam said sharply. "The note was written on a page torn from this book."

"Looks like Marshall hired Willard Spencer to kill Carse Paxton," said Long. "But Spencer didn't know either man by sight. They are both tall, and both have white-faced sorrels in their horse string. So Spencer killed Marshall thinking he was downing Paxton."

"Those are the most interesting words I've heard from you in a long time," said the sheriff, remembering the three months of deputy and dictionary. Not that Beam had anything against dictionaries, but a deputy who read one all the time was something else again. "Listen, Bert. I want you to head back to town and find Paxton, if he's still in town. Place him under arrest for killing Marshall."

"All right," said Long resignedly. "But you sure think of the nicest things for me to do. Paxton isn't going to like it."

They tied the dead man on the sheriff's

horse, though the bay didn't care for the idea at all. Then the deputy headed for town, leading the other horse and riding his roan.

Half an hour later, Willard Spencer appeared, riding away from the town. The big man saw there was apparently no one around at the place where the drygulching had taken place. He halted his horse and swung out of the saddle.

Spencer went to the place where he had hidden his hat and found it was still there. He was about to reach for the hat when a voice behind him stopped him.

"All right, Spencer!" snapped Sheriff Beam as he suddenly loomed into view, his gun covering the big man. "Figured maybe you'd come back for your hat when you found you apparently weren't even suspected of the drygulching. And I was right!"

Spencer swung around. At the sheriff's order, he drew his guns and tossed them on the ground in front of him.

"So you finally learned you killed the wrong man and decided to get out of this part of the country," Beam said. "I told you to stay away from here, but you wouldn't listen. This time, you're likely to leave with a rope around your neck."

"How did you know I downed Marshall?" Spencer asked.

"Intuition," said the sheriff, knowing that Bert Long would be returning soon with Paxton and some of the townsmen, as the deputy had been told to do as soon as he saw Spencer leave Lonely Mesa. He sighed. "And I sure hate to think how long it will be before Long reaches that word in the dictionary!"

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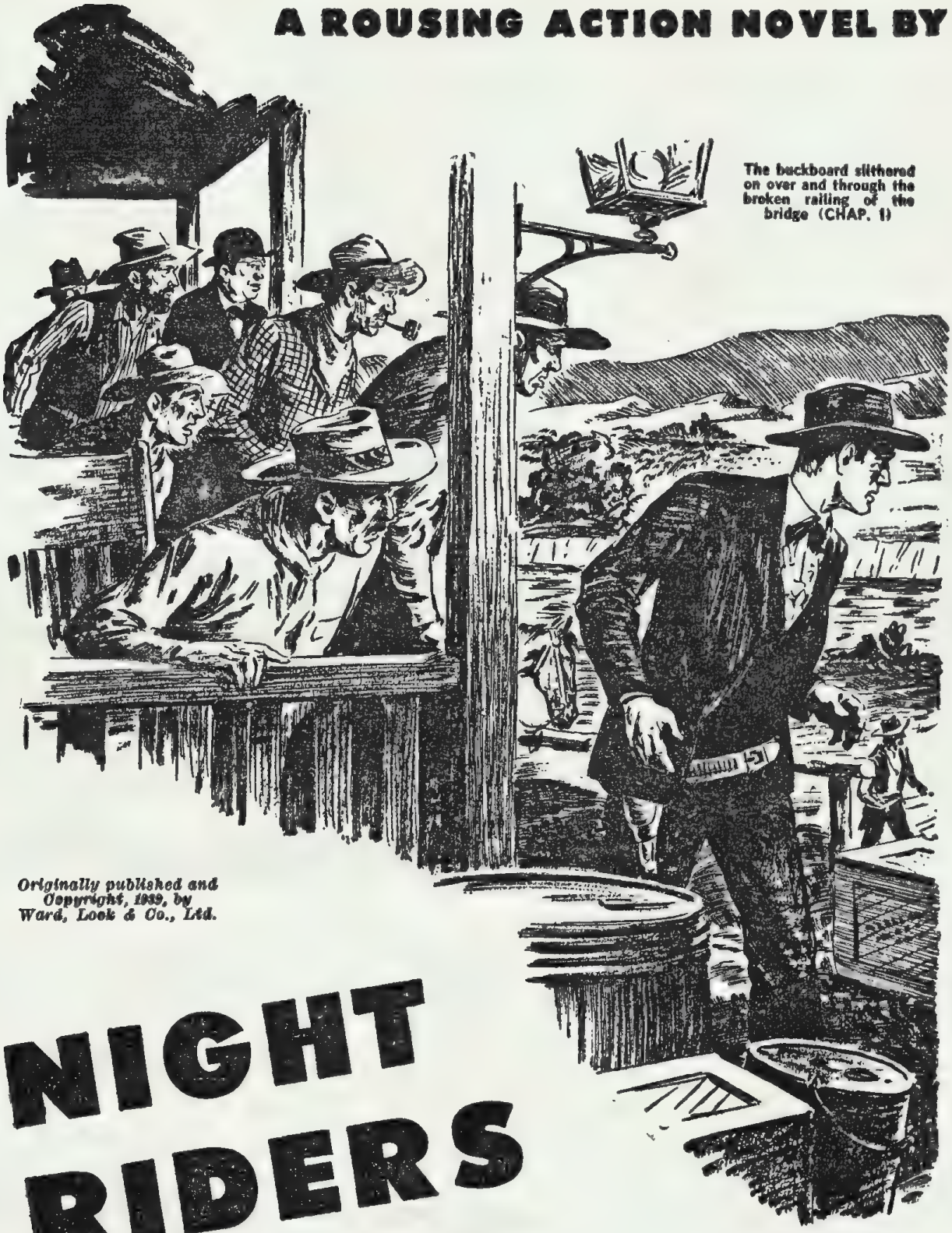

The buckboard slithered on over and through the broken railing of the bridge (CHAP. I)

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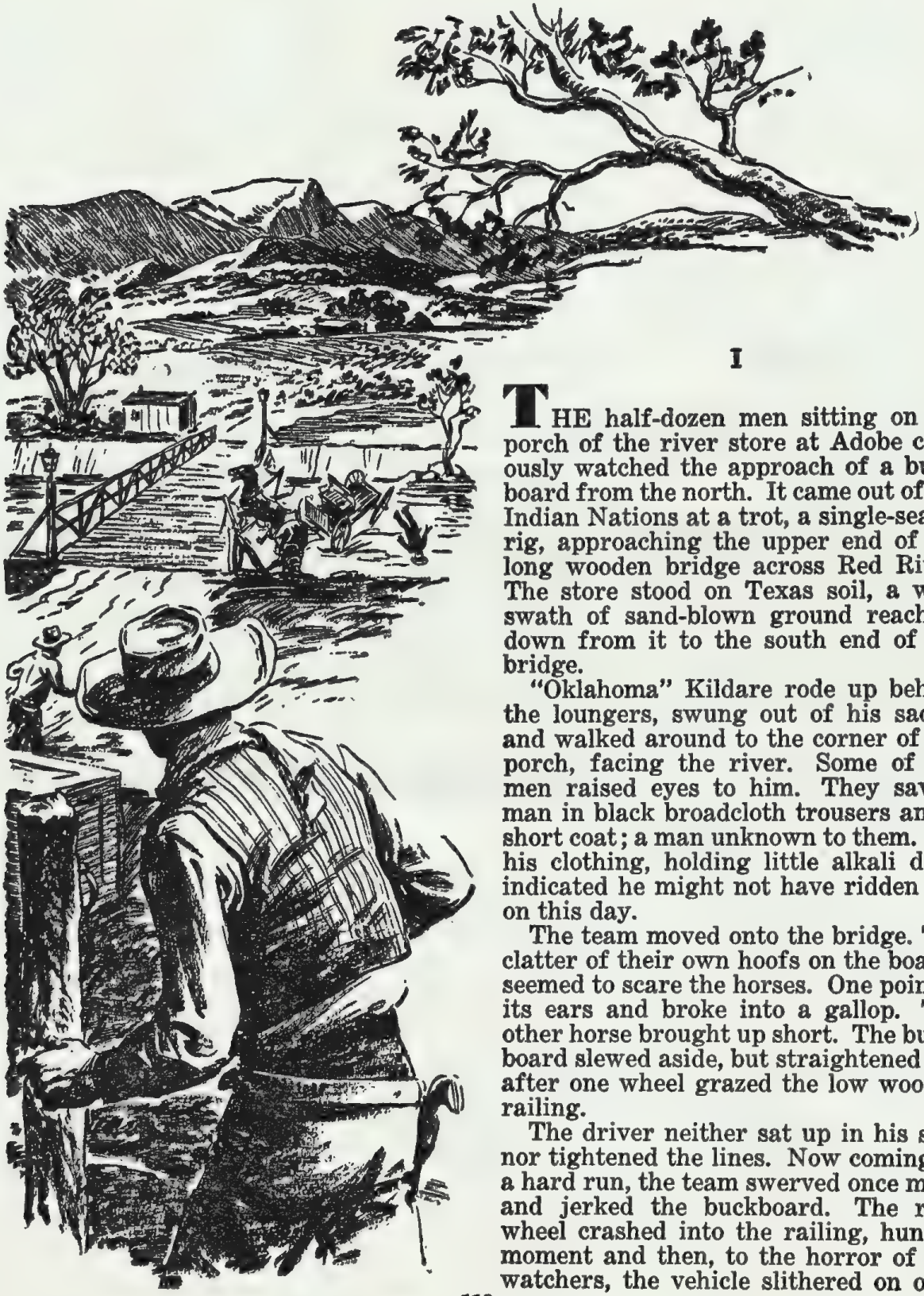
NIGHT RIDERS

Oklahoma Kildare, dubbed the "Gunhand" by those who fear his intervention, makes a lone foray against organized outlawry!

GLADWELL RICHARDSON



I

THE half-dozen men sitting on the porch of the river store at Adobe curiously watched the approach of a buckboard from the north. It came out of the Indian Nations at a trot, a single-seated rig, approaching the upper end of the long wooden bridge across Red River. The store stood on Texas soil, a wide swath of sand-blown ground reaching down from it to the south end of the bridge.

"Oklahoma" Kildare rode up behind the loungers, swung out of his saddle and walked around to the corner of the porch, facing the river. Some of the men raised eyes to him. They saw a man in black broadcloth trousers and a short coat; a man unknown to them. Yet his clothing, holding little alkali dust, indicated he might not have ridden far on this day.

The team moved onto the bridge. The clatter of their own hoofs on the boards seemed to scare the horses. One pointed its ears and broke into a gallop. The other horse brought up short. The buckboard slewed aside, but straightened out after one wheel grazed the low wooden railing.

The driver neither sat up in his seat nor tightened the lines. Now coming in a hard run, the team swerved once more and jerked the buckboard. The rear wheel crashed into the railing, hung a moment and then, to the horror of the watchers, the vehicle slithered on over

and through the broken railing, into the churning river below.

The men broke for the river, Oklahoma Kildare behind them. The horses were fighting the current toward a spit of sand, but the driver could not at first be seen.

"There he is!" a man shouted, finally, pointing toward a tiny bay just below the river bridge embankment.

Willing hands pulled the body from the river, laid it out on the sand. The man was about forty-five years old, dressed in a dark business suit.

"He's stunned, and half-drowned," said the fat storekeeper. "Turn him over and see can we get some of the water out of his lungs."

"Drowned nothin'!" cried another man. "This feller's face is white, not dark like it is when a man's been drowned."

They turned the body over, but only to pause with gasps. This man had been shot in the back of the head. None of them knew the dead man. Nor could any of them recall a sound resembling a shot.

"Well, let's pack him to the store," the fat man drawled.

The body was carried inside and placed on the floor. The storekeeper got down on his knees beside it, removing articles from the various pockets. A gun came from a shoulder holster. Then in going over the clothing, the storekeeper found a gold badge beneath the left side of the vest.

"This feller was a deputy United States marshal!" he exclaimed. "And he was shot over across the river! There's gonna be hell raised about this!"

Oklahoma Kildare took the badge from the hand of the storekeeper. On it was engraved the name, "J. H. Oldyrod." Through slitted eyes he examined the men in the store.

"There was a letter in the coat pocket," he said to the storekeeper. "Open the letter."

The storekeeper picked up the letter. He was also the postmaster at Adobe.

"This here letter belongs to Uncle Sam, or the man who it's addressed to," he said doubtfully. "It once had a stamp on it. Reckon the dead gent was on his way to post it here." He screwed his eyes on the face of the letter. "Why, the name of the man it's addressed to is plain. It's 'Oklahoma Kildare.'"

"Oklahoma Kildare?" exclaimed one of the spectators. "Why, that's the Gunhand!"

THE "Gunhand" was another name for Kildare, and one that was noted throughout the Indian Nations of Oklahoma and most of the West. Fast on the draw, the Nemesis of evil-doers, men more often heard of him as the Gunhand than as Oklahoma Kildare.

From his right hand coat pocket Oklahoma produced an envelope.

"I'm Kildare," he told the fat man. "Mr. Postmaster, if that letter is for me, likely the same hand that addressed this one also wrote my name on the one you hold."

The storekeeper took the dry envelope. Briefly he compared the writing. He nodded his head.

"The writin' is the same," he announced. "Here." He gave both envelopes to Oklahoma Kildare. "Mister, we be obliged if you'd read this here new one because we'd admire to know something of why this here deputy marshal should be killed. Maybe you already know something about it?"

Oklahoma opened the flap of the wet envelope, glancing inside. He shook his head.

"I'll have to dry it out," he said, putting the letter in his pocket. His cold eyes surveyed the men in the store, coming to rest on the storekeeper again. "There's a place called Hackberry on the other side of the river about ten miles, isn't there?" he said. "Well, I was thinking. How about you sending the body there along with the deputy's team? That's the nearest place where the Federal authorities can be found in the Indian Nations. Since this man Oldyrod was killed across the river his murder will be their business."

"That's right," answered the storekeeper. "I'll do it. . . . Uh, Kildaire, we're shore curious over these happenin's this afternoon. There ain't something else you could tell us?"

Oklahoma caught up the toppling body and whirled in behind it as protection from the next man's gunfire (CHAP. VI)

Oklahoma shook his head. "No. Reckon I'll be riding on. You don't need to bother about informing the law across the river as to what's happened. I'll tell them in Hackberry."

The men in the store watched Oklahoma mount and set off toward the bridge. All suspected him of knowing a great deal about the mysterious killing. Furthermore, identity of the dead man as a deputy United States marshal suggested that Kildare himself might be such an officer.

But Oklahoma Kildare was not working for the Federal government. A letter signed by Oldyrod had reached him days ago in a small Texas community where he had gone from the Kildare home at Choctaw, Oklahoma, to spend a brief vacation. And now, as he rode across the river bridge, setting out along the road toward Hackberry, he recalled the contents of that communication.

As the writer of the missive had men-

tioned, the men were unknown to each other. The letter had read, in part:

I am working on a difficult case in which I need expert help for a time. Our mutual friend, Judge Cantrel, has told me that if I can acquire your services you are the best man he knows who can aid me. He joins with me in asking you to come. If you cannot, will you kindly send a letter addressed to me at Adobe, Texas. I am unknown there and can safely receive mail at that place. If you cannot meet me on Thursday, the twentieth of the month, be sure to send a letter. If circumstances prevent my meeting you I will have a letter waiting there for you containing instructions how to reach me.

The next day would be Thursday. Since Oldyrod had been driving toward Adobe the day before, Oklahoma Kildare took that to mean that the marshal had known he would be unable to meet him at the designated time. So Oldyrod, having the chance, perhaps in between activity important to his case, had set out for Adobe himself to leave the letter for Oklahoma.

Oldyrod had been shot from ambush, Kildare reasoned, somewhere along this road, but so far from the river the loungers on the porch of the store had been unable to pick up the sound. Oklahoma intended to try to find the actual scene of the killing, but first he wanted to read the letter that had been found on the body. He pulled well off the road into a stand of oak timber. Removing the bridle bits from the mouth of his black horse, he permitted the animal to graze behind the timber.

OKLAHOMA opened the envelope, drew out the single sheet of paper carefully. Spreading it out full he deposited it on a tuft of grass where free circulation of air with the help of the bright sunlight would dry it quickly.

The message on the mud-splattered, wet page read:

Have solved my case. Will have made my arrests between sundown Wednesday and sunrise Thursday morning. However you should come on to Hackberry so we may reimburse you for your expenses in coming this far. Sorry to have put you to this much trouble. Unexpectedly find myself able to close the case at once.

Oklahoma scowled. Instead of completing his case, Oldyrod had been killed. And Oklahoma firmly believed that the officer had been slain so that he could not close the case on which he had been working.

Oklahoma rode on to Hackberry, arriving there an hour before sundown. At the army telegraph office he dispatched a message to Judge Cantrel at Tallequah informing him of the killing of Oldyrod and asking if he knew the details of the case on which the officer had been working. In less than thirty minutes the instruments on the desk began clicking the reply. The sergeant who took it handed the slip of paper to Oklahoma. The message read:

OLDYROD'S BUSINESS UNKNOWN TO ME STOP AM INFORMING MARSHAL AT FORT RENO.

Oklahoma was thoughtful when he went out into the dusk. Olydrod's case was becoming more mysterious all the while.

Putting his horse away in a livery barn, Oklahoma walked down the street in search of a restaurant. The lights were being lit in the various places of business that remained open in the evenings. Oklahoma came abreast of an office building. The windows on the corner were lighted. Glancing in he saw a man sitting at a desk. Over the door hung a sign;

U. S. COMMISSIONER

Oldyrod, Oklahoma thought, could have worked around Hackberry without the local officers knowing his business. He could even have done so without the Commissioner being aware of it, unless Oldyrod had decided to make arrests. The marshal would have had to obtain his warrants from the commissioner, if his business was that of the Federal Government, of course. There could be little doubt that it had been. Oklahoma opened the door, walked in.

"You are the Commissioner?" he asked the gray-haired man at the desk.

The man nodded. "Bateman," he replied. "I don't believe I have ever seen you before?"

"Reckon not," admitted Oklahoma. "This is my first trip to Hackberry. I

came here looking for Marshal Oldyrod. Read this." Oklahoma handed over the letter he had received in Texas from the now dead marshal.

Bateman glanced through the letter and heaved a sigh of relief.

"So you're Oklahoma Kildare?" he commented. "I've heard of you. Oldyrod didn't tell me he had sent for you. And Kildare, I don't mind telling you I'm beginning to get worried about Oldyrod. He was in here two days ago, identified himself, and said he would be in this afternoon for several warrants. He intimated he had been working on a dangerous case. I saw him drive out of town in a livery rig this morning, but he hasn't returned. I am afraid something has happened to him."

"Bateman," Kildare said, "what kind of a Federal case was Oldyrod working on?"

"I couldn't tell you!" declared the commissioner. "The marshal made no indication whatever. And, as there has been no crime of any importance committed here in more than four or five months, I can think of no reason for his being here unless the Federals have traced several badly wanted criminals to Hackberry. And yet, if he had traced wanted men here, I feel certain our sheriff, Pepperin, would have spotted them before this. Oldyrod worked in and around Hackberry for several months."

The door opened to admit a soldier from the army office. The man tossed a message sheet down on the commissioner's desk. Bateman opened and read it with slowly paling face. His hands shook as he passed it over to Oklahoma Kildare.

"Sontag is in charge of this district, working out of Fort Reno," Bateman offered in explanation of the signature on the message, as Oklahoma read.

TAKE CHARGE OF OLDYROD'S BODY UNTIL I GET THERE

"If Oldyrod is dead," Bateman said worriedly, "how on earth did Sontag know it in Fort Reno before the news got here?"

"I sent a message to Judge Cantrel that Oldyrod had been killed," Oklahoma explained quietly. "Cantrel undoubtedly informed Sontag."

"You—what?" cried Bateman incredulously.

Oklahoma told briefly what he knew of the marshal's death. Bateman shook his head in bewilderment.

"Well, thanks a lot, Bateman," Oklahoma said as he arose, "I'll want to see Sontag when he arrives. I'll be staying at the Caddo House."

AT THE Caddo House, Oklahoma registered and had his supper in the dining room. Out on the street afterward he halted to look across at the brightly lighted front of an immense two-story wooden building. In another place it would undoubtedly have borne the legend, "Saloon," but here in the Indian Territory where whisky was prohibited two-foot high letters proclaimed the establishment to be, "Butch Cassidy's Kansas Trail House."

The stone courthouse stood on the corner opposite Oklahoma. A little beyond it, and facing the main street was the red sandstone jail.

Five riders came up out of the blackness of the road. They drew rein before the jail and dismounted, but did not enter. In a few minutes a buckboard drove rapidly into the lighted district, and stopped near the five men. The driver was directed to turn in between the jail and the courthouse.

Oklahoma started walking toward the men. The buckboard pulled in beside a shed in the rear of the jail, and four men lifted out the body of Oldyrod, wrapped in a tarp. They carried it into the shed, but did not tarry long. One man fumbled around for a lock, but not finding one let the door remain as it was.

Oklahoma recognized the driver as a man who had been in the group at the store that had taken Oldyrod's body from the river. The man started for his rig. Turning his head to say something to a man against the shed wall his eyes fell on Oklahoma.

"Sheriff, there's the man now!" he called out.

A wide-shouldered, red-faced individual in a long black coat moved toward Oklahoma.

"You're Kildare?" he asked. "I'm

Pepperin, the sheriff. Come into the office, will you?"

Three of the deputies accompanied Oklahoma and the sheriff into the front office. Sheriff Pepperin appeared agitated.

"Kildare, I ain't askin' into the business of you Federals," he said at once. "But I'm powerful put out to find this dead man is a U. S. marshal. I knowed him around town as a feller named Watson. That's the name he went by here—but I reckon you know all that."

"Sheriff, you met the man coming in with the body?" asked Kildare.

"Well, yes, kind of. He was comin' acrost the bridge into the Territory when we got down there. We stopped him and went back to Adobe and got the rest of the story when he told us what he knew. Me and the boys was headin' for the river brakes to look into a story about some folks butcherin' stolen cattle."

"I see," replied Oklahoma thoughtfully. "So you knew Oldyrod as Watson? He did not at any time ask you for help or information?"

"Not once," returned Pepperin firmly.

Oklahoma strolled toward the street door. This man was honest, a square shooter, he decided.

"Notify Bateman the body is in, will you?" he said. "He has orders to take charge of it."

"Shore," agreed Sheriff Pepperin. "Now this killin' business—don't you think it's about time my office got something to work on? Maybe a few words from you would tell us where to look for the killers?"

Shaking his head Oklahoma said, "Pepperin, I don't know what I could tell you that would do any good. You're taking me for a Federal marshal, aren't you? Well, I'm not. And anyway, Oldyrod worked at his business in his own manner. You probably have more of an idea who killed him than I have."

Leaving the sheriff's office, Oklahoma walked across to "Butch" Cassidy's Kansas Trail House. Proceeding slowly, he made his way through a pleasure-seeking crowd toward the bar. He quickly spotted a bare-headed, fat individual whom he assumed to be Cassidy.

At the bar, Oklahoma slipped into a vacant place. While the bartender was busy he took stock of the establishment.

His eyes drifted to the ornate back bar mirror, settled quickly on the face of a young woman reflected in it. She stood with a group of men a few feet from Oklahoma, and was examining him in the mirror.

Her hair was a brilliant red, fluffy and curly. Her skin looked milk-white beneath her rouge. The expression in her eyes struck Oklahoma forcibly. And her lips were paling, leaving their unnatural redness stark. He could not recall ever having seen her before. Yet there could be no doubt that she had recognized him instantly.

He turned toward his drink, and when he looked again, both Butch Cassidy and the girl had disappeared.

II

OKLAHOMA tarried awhile longer in the big barroom, sauntering about to watch the gambling games, then went on out to the street. He had halted in front of the Kansas Trail House to roll a cigarette when a gun crashed out, then another. The red flames leaped in Oklahoma's direction. The next bullet hit him and when he tried to drop to his knees he quickly realized that he had been wounded. Able to draw his gun at last he fired twice, and dazed as he was, he realized that he had got both assailants. Then he became aware of yelling up and down the street, of men running toward the scene.

Oklahoma tried to get up, but flopped over. He straightened out, his legs convulsed, and he lay motionless. Somebody brought a light. It hurt his eyes and he closed them.

Feet thudded on the hotel porch. The voice of one of Pepperin's deputies shouted something in amazement. Somebody kneeled down beside Oklahoma, made a cursory, excited examination. He rose to his feet announcing that the man was dead.

"Them marshals shore touched a buzz-saw of some kind," said Pepperin, running up. "They made quick work of Oklahoma Kildare. And folks been sayin' the Gunhand had a charmed life. But he took two with him. Anybody

know the two dead gents over there? No? Well, lug them bodies over into the shed. Seems like we're makin' a complete morgue out of it."

Two men carried Oklahoma into the shed and left him there. Pain had made him unconscious for a while, but presently he came to, alone, and managed to lift himself first to his knees and then to his feet. He staggered to the street, where, beyond the jail, he could see several small white houses. In the nearest one a light was burning. He stumbled toward it.

He must have made it, for when Oklahoma became conscious once more he was in a small kitchen and someone was tugging at his shoulders, trying to lift him. Rolling his head he looked up into the eyes of a woman. The red-headed girl in the silvery, tight-fitting dress he had seen in the saloon!

"Why did you come to my house, of all places?" she said bitterly. "Or did you come to be paid back?"

"Paid back?" His expression told her of perplexity at the question. "I—only came here because—it was closest—light," he mumbled. "Couldn't make it—to any other." He peered up at her. "I remember you. In the Kansas Trail House. You sing for Butch Cassidy." He paused. "The two gunnies that came after me—they came from there, didn't they?"

Her eyes focused keenly on him.

"You don't know who I am?" she asked, amazed.

"Why should I?" He laughed.

"Oh," she said. "You wouldn't know of course. You've never seen me before." She went on hurriedly. "They said downtown you were dead. You *are* badly wounded."

"It's happened to me before," he muttered. "I'm still alive. You got anything I can doctor myself with?"

The girl opened a drawer. She was reaching inside for a bottle of antiseptic when Oklahoma's feverish gaze caught the glint of a small revolver. His own right hand slithered down and came up with a gun. The girl lifted the bottle out, turned and stopped short, her face

Clara in his arms, Oklahoma hurried to the buckboard (CHAP. IV)

going deathly white.

"Put the bottle down," he said harshly. "Then get over there beside the stove. I won't be long and I won't bother you any more than I have to."

"But can't I help you?" she asked.

"No," he said shortly.

She deposited the bottle of disinfectant on the table. When she backed up Oklahoma placed his gun on the table. Then up-ending the bottle against a rag he soaked it, and stuck it quickly against the wound in his side. A few drops of blood bubbled out of the hole in his shoulder. The pain of the burning disinfectant nearly drove him crazy. Dazedly he placed the bottle on the table.

For a moment or two he must have been out again. The girl was at his side when he looked up.

"Let me help you to the bed," she begged. "You will be safe here. Do you understand? No one will know. I live alone. . . ."

THE next few days and nights Oklahoma Kildare passed on a shaking bed of pain. During his conscious moments he was perfectly aware of what went on about him. He knew when the crisis came in his fever; knew that for a while the girl who sang in Butch Cassidy's Kansas Trail House remained with him day and night. At last, however, the time came when she stayed home only during the day. Soon after dark she would be gone until after midnight.

Late one night the sound of voices in the kitchen awoke Oklahoma. The girl had come home but there was somebody with her.

"I'm going to bed, Butch," he heard her say. "I've got to have my sleep if I'm to keep on singing for you. You'd better go away now."

"Oh, all right," Butch Cassidy grumbled, "if that's the way you feel about it. I'm glad to see you're coming out of it finally. For a time you had me worried you aimed to give me the old run-around. The idea of your not coming to the place at all for awhile!"

"I sent you word I was too sick to work. Now I'm better. But if I'm going to stay up all night without rest, I'm liable to break down again. Now will you chase along?"

"Sure. Ain't you going to kiss me good night, Clara?"

The girl followed him to the door. It banged shut. Presently she could be heard bracing a chair under the knob. Oklahoma heard her moving about in the kitchen for a few minutes longer, then she came to his bedroom, carrying the lamp.

"Sit down," he said. "I want to talk to you awhile."

She smiled. "Yes?"

"You're stringing along with Butch Cassidy," he began. "Why?"

"You've been insisting Butch Cassidy is out to get you?" she said. "Why?"

"I told you I figure the two men who darned near blasted me out came from the Kansas Trail House," he answered. "You recognized me in there. I don't know why. Yet you did. I looked around for you before I left the bar that night. You were gone. So was Butch Cassidy. He looked me over when I entered the place, yet he did not know who I was. You went away with him to tell him. Isn't that right?"

"No." The girl named Clara dropped her eyes. "It must be that he just happened to go out of the barroom when I did. How I knew you on sight is peculiar maybe. And yet not so strange either. You see, I had heard you described a good many times."

She moved closer, a curious light shining in her eyes. "I don't believe you would remember a cowboy named Bob Haywalk?"

He shook his head. "Am I supposed to?"

"No. Probably you never knew his name. You wouldn't have cause to, but Bob Haywalk certainly had reason to remember you! A little over a year ago you trailed down some mules stolen from the army. Recall that? Well, I had a kid brother who wanted to travel with the wild bunches through the Indian country. He did. He got in with a pretty hard gang. This kid brother was with the outlaws you caught with the horses.

"After the fight that followed, among the men who surrendered was my kid brother, Bob. You asked him if he didn't have a family somewhere. And

when he said he did have, you told him, 'Boy, you're mighty young to be strung up now or to spend the greater part of your life in the pen. I reckon the law wouldn't miss you much if you went over to your horse there and went on home where you belong.' Bob told us all about it when he got home, and, Kildare, he has never turned his mind to hitting the outlaw trail since. So you see I've done nothing for you that I haven't owed you."

An act that Oklahoma had felt at the time was no more than right, had strangely saved his own life. Oklahoma told Clara Haywalk so.

"I remember that on the night I came here you asked me if I'd come to be paid back," he said slowly. "I know now what you meant. It sort of made me wonder."

"Please forget it," she broke in. "I didn't mean it that way at all."

"Why don't you do as your brother did and go home yourself?" he asked. "Couldn't you do that, or are you in too much with Butch Cassidy to break off?"

For a moment she didn't speak. Then she laughed lightly.

"I've done nothing criminal," she said, "so that I have to stay in places like the Kansas Trail House. But excitement is in my blood. Perhaps I'll tire of it after a while and go home like my brother Bob. Our parents are dead. I have only Bob. He frequently tries to get me to come to him."

She talked awhile longer before going to her own room to bed.

OKLAHOMA slept late the next morning, not awakening until Clara carried in his breakfast. While he ate she brought in a number of newspapers.

"The mail stage came through yesterday," she said. "I thought you might be interested in the news. These papers are several days old, but one of them is the latest to reach Hackberry."

The paper bore a northern date line. It said in black type across the front page:

OKLAHOMA KILDARE SLAIN IN GUNFIGHT

Smaller type stated that Kildare had been shot down in a fight with two men, presumably because of a personal quarrel.

"The next one to come in on the stage will likely have a worse story to tell," the girl said, and smiled. "All about ghouls stealing your body!"

From that time on, Oklahoma got out of bed frequently, walking about the house.

Finally, one Saturday morning he decided he was well enough to leave that night. She did not demur when he informed her. He suggested he help that day to remove all trace of his having been there, to which she agreed.

"A very beautiful woman has come to Hackberry," Clara told him while they worked. "She seldom smiles or speaks even to the old man who arrived with her. She is slender and tall. Despite her beauty she appears to be always sad. I heard last night the two of them are looking for you."

Oklahoma ceased what he was doing to roll a smoke. The people she mentioned could be no one except his half-sister and "Arizona" Johnson.

"I have been expecting them to come," he said slowly, "since I read the newspaper story about my supposed death. They would come. The woman is my sister, Bess, the man my friend."

"Your sister? I didn't know you had a sister. I saw her on the street. Naturally, when I heard she was looking for you, I supposed she might be your wife, or your sweetheart."

He smiled wryly. "No woman would ever hook up with me. Only Bess sticks to me. I'm afraid I never treat her half right for her loyalty either. I can't somehow seem to be able to stay home where she wants me."

That night after dark when Oklahoma had eaten supper in the kitchen with Clara he arose to go. He held out his hand, speaking his thanks once more. The girl's eyes leveled on his face inquiringly.

"It's no use," he said. "Though you have tried to conceal it I know that somehow you're on the other side of the fence. And listen, if you want to make the break I'll do what I can to help you."

She shook her head.

"I am not against you," she answered, her lips trembling. "I can't go yet. But I had hoped you would go away from

Hackberry. You won't?"

"I can't," he said. "A man who had asked for my help was killed. I've got to carry on until I get my hands on the man who gunned him."

After leaving the house Oklahoma walked hurriedly to the north. In a still more roundabout way he came to the outskirts of the town, facing the long main thoroughfare. He chose this route to enter the main business sector because the first men to recognize him would not know from which locality he had emerged.

Most of the homes were lighted. Oklahoma glanced at them casually as he passed. When he arrived before one large house where a lamp was burning on a living room table he saw Commissioner Bateman sitting near the window, his back to it. He was carrying on a conversation with someone in the room whom Oklahoma could not see.

His rap on the door brought Bateman who could hardly gasp out his surprise. He led Oklahoma into the room, where he introduced him to Sontag, U. S. Marshal from Fort Reno. The two men expressed their delight at seeing Oklahoma alive, and immediately wanted to know what he could tell them about the fight and his leaving the shed after being taken there for dead. Oklahoma told them briefly all he knew, then Sontag took up the matter of Oldyrod's killing. Oklahoma produced the letter which had been taken from the slain officer's body.

"What was the case Oldyrod was working on?" Oklahoma asked.

"That's what we'd like to know!" ground out Sontag.

WHEN Oklahoma looked his surprise Sontag explained that Kildare would have to know the circumstances to understand. Oldyrod had originally been assigned to the hold-up and robbery of a train in Kansas, the United States mail having been looted as well as the express car. The robbers had disappeared, but shortly after Oldyrod went to work on the mail robbery three trains were held up in as many days.

A careful sifting of clues and statements produced the significant and surprising fact that instead of one well-organized gang committing all the robberies, each train had been looted by different outlaws. Their mode of operation ran to one well-executed plan. The trains were always halted at some water tower away from a large town. The bandits were already aboard the trains. Two men would climb into the engine cab from the tender to throw guns on the engineer and fireman. As soon as the train began to slow, bandits rose from seats in the passenger coaches and proceeded to rob them methodically and quickly before turning their attention to the express car. In some cases part of the gang wore masks. But not all of them did.

"Oldyrod was the best detective we had," said Sontag. "We are in a hole now because he worked as a lone wolf, never turnin' in a report until he was ready to make arrests and close the case. We know nothing of what he did in Kansas on the train robberies there. We lost track of him until I got a short letter from him about a month ago informing me of his whereabouts. That is all he did write me. From what Bateman has to say I can only conclude he had solved his case here unexpectedly. This last letter of his you have tends to bear out the conclusion.

"Why was he here? Of course, it is probable that he was still workin' on the Kansas train robberies. But what connection on earth could his business in Hackberry have to do with robberies several hundred miles to the north?"

Sontag asked Oklohoma if he would go to work on the death of Oldyrod. When Oklahoma agreed the marshal took a brass cartridge hull from his pocket.

"We found two of them," he said. "Yes, we managed to locate the place where the shootin' occurred. Pepperin did it. Two shots were fired. One struck Oldyrod. The other hit the buckboard seat. We found it in the rig on the Texas side of the river."

The question of Oklahoma's physical fitness occurred to Sontag. He suggested Kildare might want a week to rest up. Oklahoma shook his head.

"I don't believe there will be much hard work attached to the job," he explained. "Most of it will be right here

in town. And now, if you will excuse me, I think I'll run along. I understand my sister and Arizona Johnson are in town. If you need me tomorrow leave word at the Caddo House."

III

WALKING leisurely, Oklahoma went down the street. Approaching the main business section, he saw eight riders come up from behind him. The cavalcade broke into a trot. In the darkness he could see only the shapes of men and horses, but his long experienced eye told him that the band had covered many miles during the day. That showed in the way the horses trotted up from a brisk walk, the sagging line of the men in the saddles against the bluish night sky.

Kildare increased his stride. He managed to keep a fairly good pace. On approaching the business section of town the riders slowed to a walk. When they had almost reached the entrance of the Kansas Trail House the leading riders went off into the alley beside it.

Immediately Oklahoma turned into an alley mouth close at hand. He reached the long alley behind the business establishments just in time to see some of the riders vanish into the back door of the Kansas Trail House. Oklahoma cut back through an alley to the sidewalk and went inside the Kansas Trail House. The barroom was about half filled.

Clara Haywalk stood over against the south wall. Oklahoma knew she had seen him at once. She looked away hurriedly, interesting herself in the talk of the men at the nearest table.

The men who entered Cassidy's place by the back door were not in the barroom. Oklahoma was not surprised to discover this. He already suspected the eight men would be taken upstairs to private rooms. They would need rest and food. Also, Butch Cassidy was not to be seen.

Oklahoma moved to the stairs. Only the head bartender bothered to note where he went. The carpeted stairs gave off no sound as he ascended to the floor above. He stood over against the wall beyond a row of small tables to look down. He saw the head bartender bend over to whisper into the ear of an assistant. The assistant nodded, then both men went on dispensing drinks of raw shinny.

Butch Cassidy came through some portieres over the hall entrance. He walked fast, not looking around. Oklahoma let him get well down the steps before he moved into a darkened hallway between two rows of rooms. He went down it until he came to a door showing light about the frame. Quite a number of men were talking inside the room.

"I hope he don't take all day 'bout sendin' up grub," Kildare heard a drawling Texan voice say. "I never was so wore out. It's too long a stretch between here and Wichita Creek. They ought to be a stoppin' place in between."

Turning the knob of the door Oklahoma found it unlocked. He pushed it open quickly and stepped into the room. Eight bronzed faces went taut. Hands eased down toward gun butts.

"Was you wantin' something?" the nearest man drawled.

"Just looking you over, boys," Oklahoma said.

"Well, take a good one so's you'll know us next time!" flared a man sitting on the edge of the bed. "You ain't so purty your ownself with all them whiskers you got on your face!"

"That comes from not shaving while hiding out with gunshot wounds," said Oklahoma, grinning. "Don't let Butch talk you into trying to do what his last two men attempted. They buried them next day."

They had not been near enough to Hackberry to know about the gunfight in which Oklahoma had been wounded, but had killed his assailants. While they stared in perplexity, footsteps sounded in the hall. Then Butch Cassidy's porcine body showed in the doorway.

"Grub is coming right up, fellers," said Cassidy, at first not seeing Oklahoma who had backed into a corner. "Do you want any whisky? I've got some stuff besides rot-gut shinny. I—" He broke off then, catching from the strained faces of the men that all was not as it should be.

Cassidy let the door swing shut be-

hind him, his head turning to right and left. Sight of Oklahoma brought an exclamation of amazement. His right hand dropped into the side pocket of his coat. Oklahoma waited, expecting Cassidy to pull his gun. But instead of going into action, Cassidy brought his hand slowly into view, empty.

"You gave me a bad minute," he said. "I didn't know who you was. You're Oklahoma Kildare, ain't you?"

Oklahoma said, "Got guests?" jerking his head slightly toward the men in the room.

"Shore, boys going home from Kansas," replied Cassidy. "They're tired out. For patrons like them we provide meals in their rooms so they can get to sleep at once."

"Another explanation for men who don't dare be seen too much in public?" Oklahoma laughed. He went to the door, opened it. "Now that I've seen your friends, Cassidy, I'm wondering if maybe some of them are wanted bad by the law."

Cassidy's face went livid. Oklahoma had guessed right. The new arrivals at the Kansas Trail House were on the dodge. . . .

IN THE Caddo House Oklahoma found that Bess Kildare and Johnson had gone to their rooms. He knocked on the door of his sister's room and was bidden to enter. Bess smiled when she saw him, and kissed him.

"I hope you had a nice trip over," he told her.

"Well, we did," she said. "I was interested in a few places I had never seen before. But other than scenery nothing happened."

Arizona Johnson, in the adjoining room, heard them talking. He came in without knocking. Johnson wanted to know if Oklahoma had been wounded seriously. He said that neither of them had believed the report of his death. Oklahoma avoided explaining where he had stayed while recovering. That reticence told them what they had suspected — Oklahoma had sustained grievous injuries in the gunfight.

Oklahoma inquired as to when they were returning to the Kildare ranch at Choctaw, presuming they would be leaving Hackberry soon.

"Johnson and I have decided to stay here and help you," Bess said, and smiled. "You're going to try to solve the case that cost Marshal Oldyrod his life, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?" he demanded.

"We've talked with Marshal Sontag," Bess replied. "He told us he was going to ask you."

The gunfighter stared. Neither of the Kildares said anything more, then Johnson shrugged.

"Miss Bess and me will be workin' together," he said. "Don't figger we can do much. Her bein' with me, can't nothin' happen to her.

"All right," Oklahoma gave in. "If you insist, you can do something for me about eight men who are in Cassidy's place tonight."

He told them how Cassidy was taking personal interest in the comfort of the men.

"I'd like to know if they go out of here tomorrow and if they cross the river at Adobe," he concluded.

A fist rapped on the door. Johnson opened it. Sontag came in.

"Knocked a long time on your room without gettin' an answer," the marshal said to Oklahoma. "I just got a message from Fort Reno. Another train has been held up in Kansas. I reckon we got a cold trail here. Seems like we're going to have to get to Kansas and try to pick up a lead there on Oldyrod's business."

Oklahoma Kildare thought briefly.

"Sontag," he said, "if this isn't the last hold-up in Kansas for this season it's close to it. The cattle drives are over until next year. The trains will quit carrying large sums of money in the express car. That's what interests the bandits." Oklahoma went to pacing the floor. "Hang around Hackberry for a few days," he suggested. "Let's see what happens here after awhile."

"Uh-huh," Sontag agreed. "You think Hackberry is connected with the bandit gangs? I don't see how, Kildare. However, I'll wait this week out, anyway. You have some definite objective in mind?"

Oklahoma nodded. "Keep an eye on who comes and goes from the Kansas

Trail House," he said. "Especially watch close at night."

Sontag bowed a good night to Bess Kildare and left. Oklahoma passed through the door behind him. Out on the sidewalk the marshal asked if Oklahoma had heard yet that Ben Waddroups was in town.

"Ben Waddroups, the gambler?"

"None other. Johnson spotted him in the Caddo House, talking with Cassidy."

"Does the Kansas Trail House offer pickings enough for wild Ben?" Oklahoma smiled.

Sontag laughed quietly. "I'm wondering about it. Maybe Ben found it was a good time to move out of the railroad cowtowns." He went off down the street in the direction of the sheriff's office.

Oklahoma had moved out of the light of the Caddo House windows when he recognized Waddroups coming out of Cassidy's place. Walking fast, Oklahoma went to the red livery barn where he had put up his horse. The barnman brought the animal in a few minutes and Oklahoma saddled.

He rode out in the darkness around the front of the barn and waited. Presently a rider came along in the glow of the stars, and rode past the livery barn. It was Ben Waddroups. Oklahoma gave the gambler a head start before setting off to the north himself, the direction he had intended to take out of town anyway. Waddroups was already beyond the outskirts of the town.

OKLAHOMA had not intended to follow him, even if he had known the man would take the north road away from Hackberry. Oklahoma had decided he would ride to the place mentioned by the strange guests of the Kansas Trail House. Their mention of Wichita Creek bore out his own half-formed theory that special stopping places along the cattle trail to Kansas were ready for men who ride fast and hard and mostly at night. It could be this that had brought Oldyrod so far south of his original assignment on the train robberies.

Riding at a walk, Oklahoma passed out of town. Waddroups, apparently in a hurry, soon got well beyond the night skyline. Once well into the hills and timbered ranges Oklahoma increased his own traveling speed in order to cut down the distance separating them. He approached high places carefully, advancing warily lest he overtake Waddroups unexpectedly.

The gambler seemed to be traveling now in more of a hurry than before. This indicated that Waddroups' destination would be far. Oklahoma pushed his horse, yet always he came to the high points in the road with extreme caution. Some time after midnight, he came to the crest of a rise between two red-timbered hills and spotted saddled horses standing in the road below.

Pulling back deep into the hardwood timber Oklahoma circled to the west, arriving near the spot where the horses had been ground-hitched. Dismounting, he tied his horse to a tree and advanced afoot. A low mumble of voices reached his ears before he came to the edge of the screening timber. Oklahoma drew up. Three men, one of them Waddroups, were squatted on boot heels at the side of the road.

It would be dangerous to work close enough to overhear what they were saying. There would be nothing gained by hanging around the spot. Returning to his horse he rode on through the timber in a circle, and eventually back into the road.

Oklahoma turned north again, and set off at a fast pace. He rode out of the timber, and there on the edge of the open prairie stood a farm house. Oklahoma reined in. The light in the kitchen told him the people living here expected someone, or else had good cause to be awake this late. Somewhere about the premises a dog barked.

The dog decided Oklahoma to ride off the road and around the farm. His approach from the road would be the signal for an alarm by the watch-dog. The people here probably had a pack of mongrels. Their loud barking would be certain to bring someone out of the house to see him pass by.

Far beyond the place Oklahoma returned to the road. The dogs—and he had been right about the pack—set up a loud howling. The light in the kitchen went out, only to reappear in the front part of the house. Oklahoma

turned back into the road. The dogs were yapping toward the south. From that direction a rider appeared.

The man came on rapidly to the house. A harsh voice cursed the dogs to silence. Oklahoma approached as near as he dared, and saw two men walk away from the front of the house to the log barn.

The dogs set up a new burst of barking, then the rattle of wheels on the road echoed across the distance. The two men—Oklahoma believed one of them to be Waddroups—turned back to the house. A buckboard drove up in front. Someone was helped down. One man got into the rig and took it to the barn out of Oklahoma's sight. He watched two people in the starlight approach the front door of the house. It opened, letting out a block of yellow light. All that Oklahoma could ascertain in the brief opening while two people entered, was that one of them could be a woman.

He set off once more riding to the north. At the end of another hour Oklahoma went off the road into the rolling prairie. Unsaddling, he hobbled his horse and rolled into his sleeping blanket. . . .

While the dawn was still gray he fed his horse a few mouthfuls of grain, and ate a little dry food himself. By the time the yellow ball of the sun arched above the horizon he was on the trail again.

Oklahoma reached the Wichita Creek store a little before noon. Tossing bridle reins over a horizontal pole he stepped up on the porch and entered. A dirty, lanky, hairy-faced man rose languidly from the top of a counter where he had been napping.

THE storekeeper inquired gruffly what his visitor wanted. Making the purchase of two sacks of smoking tobacco Oklahoma went outside to his horse. The water ran low in the creek. Oklahoma crossed over on the hard, gravelly bed, rode up through the cut and away from the place. Beyond the timber line he reined in. He surveyed the surrounding country but could see no habitation, or movement abroad of any kind.

Returning inside the timber belt, but above the creek crossing, Oklahoma fed his horse while he ate a short snack. He would have replenished his food supply at the store, but on the shelves he had seen no tinned food he wanted. To have asked for something else would have aroused suspicion.

Oklahoma rested for awhile. Preparing to go on, though now not as certain he would discover anything farther to the northward, he dropped down through the timber to reconnoitre the region about the store.

A buckboard, with a horse tied behind it, rolled into view on the road across the way. Oklahoma recognized Ben Waddroups and Clara Haywalk on the seat. Waddroups was driving. He turned the rig around in front of the store, halting at the corral fence behind the place. The disheveled storekeeper appeared from the back.

Waddroups and the girl came walking back toward the place. The storekeeper passed them, greeting them by lifting his hand in salute, and went on to take care of the team.

IV

FOR upward of an hour Oklahoma watched the store, but neither Waddroups nor the girl came out again. Finally deciding that this was as far as they meant to travel, Oklahoma slipped away to look the country over, for a short distance.

A few miles to the north of Wichita Creek he approached the crest of a rocky, timbered ridge and spotted the dust of two approaching riders. Their entire appearance was similar to that of the strangers who had stopped at the Kansas Trail House. He wanted a better examination of these two, but did not decide how he would go about it until he saw the stuffed saddle-bags.

Oklahoma slipped his red bandanna over the lower part of his face, pulled his hat down and jerked his gun. Instantly the riders pulled up.

"Get them up, quick!!" Oklahoma rapped out.

The two did not hesitate. Relieving them of their guns he tossed them over on the side of the road. Search revealed no more weapons, and Oklahoma turned

his attention to the saddle-bags. Each contained a quart bottle of whisky wrapped with soiled clothing to prevent the bottles breaking. The riders grinned. Evidently the bags had previously contained something else, which somewhere along the route had been removed. Their very attitude seemed to say, "We fooled you that time!"

"Pick up your guns, and ride," Oklahoma ordered.

He let them get well down the road before he stepped back into the timber. There he waited until the sound of hoofs awoke the stillness. Ben Waddroups and the two riders who had ridden back to the store raced up to the scene of the hold-up.

"Right here's where it happened, Ben!" one of them cried.

Waddroups dismounted. He moved about looking at the sign on the ground.

"It don't tell me a thing," he said at last. "Oklahoma Kildare is somewhere along this road. He stopped at the way station. But he wouldn't he holding nobody up. It's some real hold-up hombre. And I'm afraid he's going to try to stop the others. Let's ramble."

"What about the girl?" asked one of the riders. "We ought to tell her it ain't no use her waitin' around."

"If she ain't got enough sense to start back for Hackberry come dark," Waddroups snorted, "then she can roast here for a month for all I care!"

"Butch is gonna raise a ruckus over this!"

"Let him howl," answered Waddroups.

The dust had settled down when Oklahoma drew up before the Wichita Creek store a second time. Clara Haywalk was there when Oklahoma walked quietly inside. The hairy storekeeper turned suspicious glances at him.

"Watcha want?" he snarled. "Strangers ain't overly welcome in these parts!"

"Why, I thought maybe I could get a bite to eat before going on," Oklahoma said. "Or maybe I can't?"

"Of course," the girl spoke up, and asked the storekeeper, "Supper is about ready, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah," he said, with bad grace and passed through a door into the rear of the building.

Clara turned on Oklahoma at once.

"It was you, wasn't it?" she demanded. "I know they didn't think so, but—"

"What are you talking about?"

Oklahoma feigned perplexity. Her face reddened. She bit her lips, apparently taking herself to task for having said more than she should.

"Oh, never mind," she said. "Forget it."

The storekeeper came back. "My woman's dishin' some vittles up," he said. "They'll be a buck."

Oklahoma tossed him a silver coin.

"Hitch up my team, please," the girl said to him.

They ate in silence in the kitchen, then Oklahoma followed the Haywalk girl out to the buckboard. Without waiting for permission he tied his horse to the back of the vehicle, climbed on to the driver's seat and took the lines. They were several miles from the store before either spoke.

"Clara," said Oklahoma suddenly, "why don't you cut and run before you get in too deep? You're going to get hurt if you keep on with Waddroups and Cassidy."

SHE debated in silence. Then her fingers touched his arm.

"Oklahoma, there's one thing I want you to believe. This is positively the first trip I have ever made for them!"

"And it has fallen through," he drawled. "So will the rest of them, Clara. Are you going to keep on and get caught?"

"I'm afraid to leave!" she cried. "They'd kill me if I did. I can't, Oklahoma! I'm going no further than the farm tonight. You'd better leave me now."

"What? Leave a lone woman driving on this road at night?"

"Oh, I'll be safe," she said bitterly. "Please, Oklahoma, go. For all we know there may be watchers along the way in hiding. Don't you see, you being found with me might look suspicious? It would surely get me into trouble!"

"Sorry," Oklahoma said. "I didn't think of that. I'll take off."

He stopped the buckboard, handed the lines to her, and leaped out. In another

moment he had his horse off the side of the road. Oklahoma mounted, meaning to follow, but the girl whipped up the team and vanished into the night. Not until after the moon finally came up did he sight her again. Then he was just in time to see two riders appear, one on each side of the buckboard, and talk to her for several minutes. At last they came around behind the rig, and she drove on, but at a slower pace.

The vehicle, now obviously under escort, turned from the Kansas road to the left. Ahead lay a creek. Oklahoma followed, but when those ahead turned into the creek timber, he lost sight of them for awhile.

Oklahoma reined down to reconnoitre. A light sprang up suddenly down the way, only to be blotted out by the closing of a door. Oklahoma rode through the trees until he picked up the faint outline of a log cabin. Leaving his horse back from it he advanced afoot. The buckboard team stood tied to a tree perhaps three hundred yards away from the cabin. The mounts of the two men had not been left with it. Oklahoma could not find them anywhere about the place. However, the saddled horses could have been left hidden as he had hidden his own.

Minutes drifted by fast as Oklahoma crouched low against the ground, watching. The silence was abruptly broken by the noise of riders behind the cabin. They came around the end, two of them. Spurring into a gallop they headed toward the distant road.

Not being sure the two were the same who had escorted the girl, Oklahoma continued to watch the cabin. If they were the same men, that meant their horses had been left behind it, and that there were two doors in the cabin.

Some time elapsed before Oklahoma noticed that the light leaking out of the cabin did not appear as bright as formerly. That mystified him until he smelled burning wood. Startled, he circled through the timber to the rear of the cabin. The cabin had no windows.

Oklahoma ran to the back door, jerked it open, only to be met by a burst of flame and fumes. He slammed the door shut lest the draught increase the ferocity of the blaze, and sped around the corner to the front door. The smoke now dimmed the light until it could hardly be seen at all.

Jerking open the door Oklahoma leaped back when more flame and smoke burst out at him. The instant he could see into the room he located the cause of the fire. A lamp had been overturned with a small table against the partition wall. The burning oil had ignited.

Ducking low, Oklahoma hurtled himself into room. Holding his breath he tried to locate Clara Haywalk and finally found her on the floor. Stooping over he grabbed her by the shoulders, lifted her, and ran out with her to the buckboard. A moment later the roof of the cabin fell in with a crash. The red tongue of fire leaped free into the sky, illuminating the clearing. A thin film of cloud dimmed the light of the moon. Oklahoma glanced at it, glanced around at the night sky. Not many stars showed in the heavens. The sky was swiftly being overcast by clouds rolled up by a northwest wind.

"This makes us even on the life-saving business," said Clara shakily. "If you hadn't come along I would have died." She shuddered against the wheel of the buckboard.

"So you're safe driving this road at night," he commented drily. "Those two were some of your playmates, I suppose?"

THE girl shook her head in a puzzled way.

"I don't understand it," she said. "I've seen them around the Kansas Trail House a lot of times. They're supposed to be trusted men, yet they brought me to this cabin and made me prisoner. After they went away I tried to get out of the bunk. I didn't quite make it. Fell on the floor, knocking over the table holding the lamp. Oh, Oklahoma, I'm sure glad you came along!"

"You didn't have what they expected you to," he said. "That's why they brought you in here?"

Again Oklahoma lost. Clara decided against saying too much.

"I'll have to hurry now," she told him. "It will be daylight before I can reach the farm. There will be no rest for me

before I have to go on. I—I'm expected back by noon."

"Smell the air," he suggested. "If that doesn't tell you of rain, look at the sky. Soon the clouds will open up. You"ll never make it."

Nevertheless, he turned the buckboard around for her into the road, assisted her to the seat, and watched her drive away. Then he went to his own horse, and followed.

When buckboard and horseman were in the first of the red hills a shower of rain rumbled down. The girl whipped up the team, fearing the full force of the threatening storm. Abruptly a new band of riders appeared out of the night to surround the buckboard. Oklahoma suspected they had been waiting for it on the road. He moved forward warily, could pick out at least six distinct riders. When he heard the voice of the drawling Texan he suspected all eight of Butch Cassidy's strange guests made up the band.

"Ma'am, Butch got worried when Ben Waddroups didn't come back on time," the Texan said from his saddle. "That's how-come we're here."

The man spoke loudly, but the girl in answering kept her voice so low Oklahoma could hardly hear even the sound of it. She spoke at some length, probably relating the events of the night, and how she had been halted by the two men who had made her prisoner in the cabin. Angry exclamations came from the riders. Then the leader of the band spoke rapidly to a man near him. The rider cut away from the group, heading southward along the road.

When the buckboard got under way once more, part of the band went ahead of it, the rest falling in behind. The men in the rear would be particularly alert, so Oklahoma dropped well behind. However, he was no longer worried about the girl's safety. The Texas gang would escort her to Hackberry, probably after a brief pause at the farm. He assumed the farm to be another of the stopping places for night riders along the main route across the Territory.

The storm arrived, presaged by heavy thunder. Rain fell in sheets. Oklahoma halted long enough to don his oiled slicker.

A little west of the farm Oklahoma waited until the rain began to slacken. He could see the lighted window only dimly from where he sat his saddle. A flickering of the light through the storm-laden night told of people walking around in the room. Oklahoma tied up his horse, placed the slicker over the saddle to keep it dry, and moved forward on foot. At the gate stood the buckboard with a tarpaulin thrown over the seat. Oklahoma ventured into the yard and around to the lighted side of the house.

The window was raised a crack from the bottom. Oklahoma peered into the room. Clara, sleepy-eyed, was sitting in a chair. Several of the Texas men hovered near her.

"We got a guitar here and one of the boys is packin' a harp," came the voice of the leader. "What say we have a dance?"

"Somebody pass the bottle," urged another voice.

A bottle being handed from man to man came within Oklahoma's view.

"I'm so tired," said the girl. "I can't get much rest before it will be time to go on to Hackberry."

"Pshaw now, we wouldn't think of disturbin' your beauty sleep at dawn," rallied a drink-sodden voice. "Strike up the band, boys!"

Clara protested, but without avail. Oklahoma saw a burly cowboy reach out and seize her about the waist. When the music paused another man ran across the floor to her. After that the half-drunken, laughing men were there to take her whenever the musicians momentarily halted. This went on for nearly thirty minutes before the guitar and harp player quit for any length of time.

"That will be all," Clara Haywalk spoke up determinedly. "I'm going to bed. I'm too tired to dance any more."

SHE started out of the room. A man Oklahoma had not seen before urged her back to the center of the floor.

"Everybody's danced with you 'ceptin' me!" he cried. "Reckon you won't fall down before one more!"

She had had enough torment. Suddenly, slapping the man's face, she

turned and ran from the room. Loud guffaws greeted the luckless fellow.

"Woof!" came close to Oklahoma. He backed up as a dog sprang at him. Coming with the laughter in the room the yelp of the dog under the force of a quickly delivered kick did not seem loud.

Oklahoma thought he was safely out of a tight situation until another dog started for him. Oklahoma lifted his foot to kick again. The muzzle of a gun was abruptly shoved in against his back.

"Don't move!" the man with the drop ordered. "I'm blastin' you if you try anything." He raised his voice to shout: "Boys, come runnin' out here an' see what I got!"

Boots thudded toward the front door. Oklahoma whirled and drove backward at the same time. His attacker's gun roared, but the bullet missed. Oklahoma heard the loose gun strike against the wet wall of the house as he charged the man. The fellow went down, over backward, yelling loudly.

Oklahoma raced for the back gate. The crack of the gunshot had slowed the men up in front of the house. Oklahoma whirled at the gate, threw two bullets along the wall to keep them from charging on him too fast. Then he went on through the gate.

"He's gettin' away!" a voice cried out.

Guns roared. Oklahoma dashed for his horse, leaping into the saddle on top of the wet slicker. He grabbed the bridle reins and sped into the rain-swept night.

V

THE following morning Arizona Johnson arose early. He was the first person to reach the hotel restaurant, but hardly had he got seated before Bess Kildare walked in. She looked a little worried, but rested and refreshed—and lovely.

"Wasn't no need of you gettin' up Miss Bess," said Johnson. "I figgered on takin' a short ride up the way to see if Oklahoma's comin' home. He's laid out a second night now."

Her failure to answer brought a troubled frown to Johnson's back. He ate hurriedly. Yet when he arose to go, Bess got up with him.

"Now look here, Miss Bess—" he began.

"I know"—she smiled—"you're only going up the road a piece. Well, I'm tagging along. Let's go and get our horses at the barn, shall we?"

When they left the livery barn Johnson made no bones about the ride turning out to be a hard one. But the day was clear and bright following the rainstorm, and it was not yet noon when they reached the now crusting red clay hills where the hardwood timber line fringed out. They were approaching the open, looking out across the prairie toward a tree-lined water course, when the sound of shots echoed through the timber from the east. Johnson pulled around. Suddenly there were more shots. The old man struck the spurs to his mount.

Bess hastened on behind him as he tore off through the timber. Once more came the sound of shooting, briefly, then stopped altogether. The direction of the new outburst caused Johnson to change course to the left. Bess hesitated to follow, for the first instant, for she was positive that the second outbreak had come from the north of the first. Then she went on.

This last crashing of guns echoed from near the ragged timber line. Johnson verged over toward it, in between two hills. He reined in. Bess, coming up beside him, saw two riders ahead just galloping out onto the open prairie at a dead run.

The man in front kept slowing up and looking back at the one following him. That rider seemed to be injured, from the way he was gripping the middle of his body with one hand. The man ahead dropped back to him. Across the distance it appeared he slapped the wounded rider in the face. Whatever he did put some life into the injured fellow, because he sat up straighter in his saddle and caught up with his companion. They went on, stirrup to stirrup, at break-neck speed.

Johnson led the way through the timber until he came to horse tracks in the soft soil. Before they reached the scene of the gun battle they saw three saddled horses. Johnson went on slowly alone until he reached the spot where three dead men lay on the ground,

widely apart from one another. Arizona picked up something from the ground, then moved across to the horses of the dead men, examining the saddle-bags. In a moment he rode back to where Bess waited.

"Looks like the three of them camped here durin' the night," he said. "Them other two that got away come in a little spell ago. Look at this, Bess."

He handed her a package of currency he had discovered near one of the bodies. The flat package still had a bank wrapper around the center.

"A Kansas bank!" Bess exclaimed. "Does that mean—"

"Maybe, and again, maybe not," Johnson replied carefully. "Thing is, I can take up the trail of them two—maybe catch 'em, because they won't get far with one of 'em bad wounded. Now, ma'am, would you be of a mind to cut and run for Hackberry? In case Oklahoma ain't there you can tell Marshal Sontag. They can easy pick up my trail. This here business may tie in with whatever it is Oklahoma is tryin' to solve, and here's a good chance to help right at our hand."

Bess nodded, and instantly Arizona Johnson spurred his horse into a gallop. As soon as he disappeared into the trees the girl turned west, riding at a gallop herself. The main road showed up before her through the ax-hewn gash through the timber. She headed for it, but only to draw up quickly, amazed at the abrupt appearance of riders coming out of the woods across the road.

BESS raced for the edge of the timber. But already she had been seen. They may or may not have seen that she was a woman—perhaps did not care—but almost instantly bullets whistled around her. She felt a sharp sting in her right side. Guns roared again, but all the next bullets were far wide of the mark. She leaned forward in her saddle to keep her horse in a dead run. She felt blood trickling out of the wound in her side, dared not pause. The next time she looked back, the pursuit had dropped far behind, although the riders were still pounding leather after her. She was gaining on them!

And then, suddenly, the stride of her horse faltered. His gait broke and he pitched down head-first. But already warned by the faltering stride she leaped from her saddle as the horse fell, managing to hang onto her bridle reins.

On the ground she was out of view of the pursuit for a moment—until the riders should gain high ground on the plain. Hastily she cast an eye at the timber growing close to the trail.

She had feared her mount was done for, but with a struggle the horse got to his knees. At her urging he managed to get up, but held a foreleg limp. Bess knew she could no longer ride the animal. She turned into the timber, gently coaxing the crippled horse to follow. The mount took an exploratory step, then hobbled painfully after her.

The riders heaved up on the plain, spread out and slowed down. Not for long did they remain in doubt as to where she had gone. Nor was there any longer any doubt they knew they were trailing a woman. A rider discovered the tracks on the ground.

"She got into the woods!" he called. "Ain't no tellin' which way she went, and that hoss she's ridin' is a regular streak of lightnin'. No chance of us runnin' *him* down. Never see a hoss like him. Let's go back to them bodies we found in the hills. We'll figger out what happened there and take up the trail of them fellers that hightailed away."

The six riders turned back the way they had come and Bess, listening, drew a long breath of relief. But she waited a while before she pushed out of the brush. Just as she did another rider appeared.

It was Oklahoma!

Bess told him briefly but hurriedly about coming out with Johnson, of the dead men in the wooded hills, her start back to Hackberry, and the appearance of the riders who had sent her into hiding. In a hesitant voice she admitted they had shot at her.

Oklahoma turned about, his eyes fixed anxiously on her gashed side. Fresh red was seeping from the wound as she tried to hold herself steady.

Quickly he grabbed and lifted her into his own saddle. Then he went back into the timber. She heard a shot, closed her eyes, and her lips trembled. That

would be her horse, put out of misery.

When her brother returned he was carrying her riding equipment.

"Why have you brought my saddle?" she asked.

"I found a corral up above here," he replied. "Horses in it. Hidden away it can only mean that wanted men use it. But here's where we borrow one of their horses."

He handed her the bridle reins of his horse, and for a little while walked beside her in silence.

"How did you happen to be here?" she ventured at last.

"Got caught at the farm I told you about last night," he said. "Ran away, holed up, but this morning they picked up my trail. I guess it must have been the same bunch who chased you. I cut back around the farm and found the horses in the corral on the west. All Texas branded stock."

Their trip to the small pole corral took only a short time.

OKLAHOMA chose a large-boned bay and roped it. Bringing the animal to the outside of the corral he quickly cinched on her saddle.

"Up you go," he said, and lifted her from his saddle to that of the bay. "Now you're going back to Hackberry for I'm taking you there. You're going to sit in the Caddo House until I grab off the killers of Oldyrod. Johnson is going to stay there with you, too, or else I'm going to give him a working over he won't forget. When this thing ends I'm going to take you home!"

"Oklahoma," she said hopefully, "does that mean you'll stay at the ranch for a few months at least?"

But, mounting his own horse, he made no reply, and they rode quickly away from the corral. Riding through the timber took more time than if they had gone straight to the main road. But Oklahoma wanted to keep under cover on account of the hard-riding Texans who were on the loose. He wondered just how soon they would pick up Johnson's trail and run him down. He was thinking, too, that Johnson must have trailed the riders he was after westward.

A thin streamer of smoke in the air ahead brought to him a sudden warning. Oklahoma dismounted, and left his horse with Bess while he went up steadily to reconnoitre, to find out whether the smoke was from a campfire, or whether there was a cabin hidden in the trees. Parting the bushes, he saw four saddled horses tied to a sapling. Their riders were sitting at the edge of the road near the creek bank.

Their clothing was wet to the hips, showing that they had been crossing swollen streams. Oklahoma guessed the fire they had kindled to dry out by would not burn long before the Texans would again be on their way, nor was he wrong. While he watched three other riders approached on the other side of the creek. For a moment the members of the two groups regarded each other.

"Well, why don't you come on across?" a lanky rider asked from the other side of the stream. "Come on! We shore need your help. Fatso, Joedy and Topper are over in the timber a few miles from here dead, killed by that crew that's cuttin' in on us. The other boys are tryin' to work out the trail of three riders through the tracks we made crossing over theirs by chasin' a danged female around the prairie."

Oklahoma muttered, "Uh-huh," and dropped his hand to his gun. Bess reached out silently and clutched his arm. He did not turn his head. He kept looking toward the creek crossing.

The men on the north side were explosive and angry. They wanted to know if the others knew the identity of the gang that was trying to cut in.

"We'll danged soon find out, once we get goin' on that there trail!" shouted an angry voice on the nearer creek bank.

"They got it all?" called a man on the opposite shore.

"Got it all and vamoosed pronto!" came the reply, with a curse.

The men who had kindled the fire wasted no more time trying to dry out. They ran for their horses, rode into the water and plunged off into deep channel. The current took them downstream some, but eventually they were all across, and the enlarged band raced down the road at full tilt and out of sight.

"Reckon we better try crossing our-

selves," Oklahoma said to Bess. "Johnson is going to have the bad luck to run into some of that gang if we don't find him."

Across the stream they took a zigzag course from creek bank to timber line and soon picked up the fresh tracks of three horses. To Oklahoma's practised eye it was readily evident the third rider had been trailing the other two. This bore out his belief that the men had gone westward. But following them also brought him and Bess into dangerous territory.

Oklahoma sped to high ground where he found a single trail leading off to the left. The rider had cut through the timber out into the clear. If he proceeded in a straight line he would come in at the farm behind the barn. At this same spot Arizona Johnson had hesitated as Oklahoma now did. But he had turned back after the other rider. So did Oklahoma.

IN LESS than a mile the rider who had gone out of the timber came back to join his wounded companion. Oklahoma found where Johnson had waited. The wounded man had ridden slowly, then had halted until his companion returned. For a couple of miles then the two men had ridden fast. But again they had been forced to slow down, probably because of the wounded man.

Oklahoma found numerous horse tracks swinging into an old, weed-grown wagon road. Johnson had trailed his men into it, and then over their tracks a buckboard and team had been driven from the direction of the farm on the main road.

A slow smile kindled on Oklahoma's face. He thought he could guess who was driving the rig. Because of the swollen streams and strange riders along the Kansas trail, Clara Haywalk was taking a roundabout way to Hackberry.

The lone horseman had started for the farm, but probably had returned to his wounded partner when he had seen the buckboard. Did they mean to molest the girl again? Oklahoma did not worry much about that, but he was concerned about Arizona Johnson who was somewhere in between the two parties, likely close on the heels of the riders.

Rapidly the rolling prairie and grass-covered low hills fell behind. Oklahoma kept his eyes on the route to the west. The character of the country prevented him from seeing far ahead until the winding road swung into a sort of basin. Ahead lay another series of prairie hills. Near at hand the wagon road turned due south. Not far off Oklahoma caught sight of the buckboard driven by Clara Haywalk. Then a faint sound came from a thick stand of persimmon trees, and Arizona Johnson rode out, grinning widely.

"The gal in the rig is goin' to Hackberry, seems like," Arizona drawled. "I see you found Bess, Oklahoma. Guess she told you everything. Uh, one of the two fellers that done the shootin' and stealin' in the timber started for the farm back there but he turned and come splittin' the breeze back to his wounded pardner. They turned off in here and are over in a cabin behind this here hill. I reckon one of them boys ain't goin' to leave the cabin."

Oklahoma inclined his head. He asked Johnson to take Bess to Hackberry without further delay, and to keep her there. The old gunfighter wrinkled his eyes, and glanced at Bess.

"The Texas trail riders threw lead at her," Oklahoma growled. "One bullet cut her."

Johnson's eyes snapped from Oklahoma to Bess, anxiously studying her as she sat in her saddle. "Where you goin' from here?" he demanded of Oklahoma as he nodded peremptorily to Bess and prepared to leave.

"I'm calling on the two boys in the cabin," replied Oklahoma grimly. . . .

Ten feet back from the door of the cabin Oklahoma swung to the ground, tossing down his bridle reins. That would hold the mount. He whistled a bar or two of "On the Lone Prairie" and strode toward the door.

"Hey, you inside, I'm comin in!" he called out. "You might just as well take it easy."

No answer. Oklahoma went in sideward, keeping close to the wall. He did not take his hand away from his gun. Then he saw the men across the room.

The wounded man lay on a dirty blanket spread on the floor. The other,

a cowboy, leaned against the wall, his thumbs hooked over his cartridge belt.

"Where's the old hawker that trailed us?" the cowboy asked. "It's him we expected."

"Johnson?" Oklahoma smiled. "He's hitting the trail for town."

THE man on the floor rolled his head around.

"It's Oklahoma Kildare, ain't it?" he mumbled. "Did you want anything of us in particular?"

"It all depends," replied Oklahoma. "You boys came to Hackberry a few days ago, didn't you? You haven't been here before?"

"Correct," the cowboy answered.

"You two didn't fetch any loot with you from any hold-ups or the like, but you cut back up the trail and tried to grab yourselves some. Why? Been doublecrossed some way? Funny you Texans should have a falling out with Cassidy and Waddroups."

"It maybe ain't so funny as you think," grumbled the Texans. "Us ain't the first them yahoos have tricked and sent on without the pay-off. If we hadn't of had this piece of bum luck we'd be well out of the country by now."

"Maybe you still have a chance," Oklahoma told him significantly. "Depends on how soon your partner can get well enough to ride. And yet . . . Yes, I reckon I ought to do something about you boys. I can't seem to forget you tied up a woman in a cabin and left her there to burn up with the house."

The cowboy jerked upright against the wall.

"What you mean burned up? I seen her drivin' away from the farm not long ago."

"She is alive because I happened along before the cabin burned. I took her out. Seems she kicked over the light and set the place afire trying to get loose from the ropes you boys tied her with." Oklahoma's voice grew stern and cold. "Now, I'll take the money you boys killed those men in the timber for."

"Then what?" the Texan asked quickly.

Oklahoma shrugged. "Maybe nothing more—unless you should get to bothering me some more."

The Texan thoughtfully rolled a brown paper cigarette. Finally he inclined his head and, followed by Oklahoma, walked out to where the horses stood. He unfastened a saddle-bag, pulled out a small white sack filled with bundles of currency and passed it over. Oklahoma nodded casually as he took the loot, shoved it inside his shirt. The Texan stepped back as Oklahoma forked his horse.

Oklahoma set out down the old road after the buckboard, but he had not gone far before he heard the sound of gunfire. He urged his horse into a run and topped a rise to find the buckboard off the road behind a hummock. Clara Haywalk was on the hummock staring off to the south.

She turned as Oklahoma raced up. Relief showed in her face, then worry.

"Don't go down there!" she cried. "I was on high ground when I saw two men riding this way—Sheriff Pepperin and the U. S. marshal. Several men opened fire on them from some thorn apples on the left side of the road. Sheriff Pepperin fell out of his saddle. I—"

Oklahoma dashed past her over the hummock. He could see Pepperin's body lying in the road. Beyond, in the high grass and weeds, Sontag was standing off the men in the thorny wild apples as best he could.

Riding fast Oklahoma raced up from behind the thicket as Sontag sent bullets furiously into the apple trees. A fusillade answered him. Oklahoma estimated there must be five or six men in the trees. He jerked out his own gun and cut loose. He saw one man fall, then five riders tore out of the thicket, fleeing westward as fast as they could spur or quirt. The dead man left behind was a stranger to Oklahoma.

Sontag, wounded in the fusillade, lay prone. Oklahoma dismounted near him. His shirt front was bloody. Oklahoma touched him. Sontag sat up, smiling wanly.

"We ran right into it," he managed to explain weakly. "Reckon Pepperin got his. I hope he ain't dead, but I haven't much hope for him."

Oklahoma helped Sontag to his feet. They walked to where the sheriff lay. He was not dead, but unconscious from

two serious wounds. Clara, white-faced, drove over the hummock and stopped behind the men, asking anxiously what she could do.

"Take these two men to Commissioner Bateman's house in Hackberry," he told her. "We'll use the saddle blankets to make Pepperin's ride as easy as possible. And Sontag hadn't better try to ride his horse."

When the buckboard had driven off, Oklahoma turned into the prairie after the ambushers. He took their trail for several miles without avail, and it was nightfall before he reached Hackberry. Here, after putting his horse in the livery stable, he went straight to Bateman's house where Sontag lay on a bed propped about by pillows. Pepperin's condition had changed some for the better, though he remained unconscious.

"His head deputy rode out to a ranch to get a posse of cowboys," Sontag told Oklahoma. "He aims to take them after the ambushers. I couldn't make him savvy they got too big a start."

"The town pretty quiet?" Oklahoma wanted to know.

"Yes. Bateman and I have been discussin' Cassidy and Waddroups. He thinks the same as me. We couldn't hold them two ornery cusses any longer than they got a hearing."

"That's right," Oklahoma grinned. "We couldn't hold them — not by arresting them."

Oklahoma left the house and went down the street to a restaurant. He had almost finished eating when a young cowboy walked in and sat down at the counter beside him. The cowboy stuck out his hand, which Oklahoma accepted. He thought he should know the young man; there was certainly something familiar about the clean-shaven face. In the next breath he recognized Clara Haywalk's brother Bob.

"Thought you quit running with outlaws?" said Oklahoma.

"Shore," returned Bob Haywalk quietly. "I come down here to take Clara home. A spell back Clara wrote me and my wife, and I didn't like the way her letter read. So I lit out for here, got here today, and didn't locate Clara until after she drove in from somewhere with a couple of wounded law officers. Oklahoma, my sister shore has got me worried. She tells me to trot along back home, that she is all right. But I can easily see she ain't. She is shore in trouble of some kind."

Oklahoma crawled off the stool, and they walked out to the street.

"You better grab Clara and get her away from Hackberry fast as you can," he warned Bob Haywalk. "Her trouble is connected with this Cassidy and Waddroups business. I guess she's afraid of them and can't leave. That's bad. She's in danger."

"What the dickens can I do?" cried Bob. "Guess the only thing I can do is go gun this Cassidy."

"Leave that to me," Oklahoma told him harshly. "Go on to her house. I'm going to have a little conversation with Cassidy. One of his men shot *my* sister!"

VI

WHEN Oklahoma dropped into his sister's room at the Caddo House a few minutes later to cache the money he had taken from the Texan, he was relieved to find that Bess had suffered no more than a shallow bullet wound. After a short talk with her and with Arizona Johnson, he went on to Butch Cassidy's Kansas Trail House.

He sauntered in through the rear door, stopping short of the bar in the shadows of the small hallway. The patrons were few, and mostly local.

The head bartender was lolling against the bar. Oklahoma beckoned him to the hallway.

"Whatcha want?" he asked Oklahoma surlily.

"I want to see Cassidy, and I want him right now."

The bartender drew a long breath. "I dunno how you goin' to do it. Butch ain't in town."

"Where did he go to?"

"To Texas, and I dunno when he's comin' back. He told me to watch his place till he got back or sent me other instructions."

"I think he's in town, that you're lying," Oklahoma told him, shoving the muzzle of his six-gun against the barman's side. "You lead the way to him!

Anyhow I'd admire to see what strange guests the Trail House has tonight."

The barman claimed there was no one on the second floor, but what he meant was men who would be of interest to Oklahoma Kildare. They found three drunken cowboys, sleeping it off. In another room were two girls who swore at them on being disturbed. Oklahoma paid them little attention, entering their rooms and looking about anyway. Returning to the ground floor he permitted the bartender to go on with his business. Then he quit the place via the rear door as he had entered.

Oklahoma went along the street to the small house occupied by Clara Haywalk. No light burned in it. He tried the door, and found it locked. That did not mean there was no one in the house.

Frowning annoyedly, wondering where Bob Haywalk and his sister could be, Oklahoma alternately kicked and hammered on the door for nearly five minutes. A man walked silently up to him.

"Goin' to break in?" Arizona Johnson drawled.

"For two cents I would," rapped Oklahoma. "Bob Haywalk ought to be here, or somebody."

"Dunno who you're talkin' about, but if they was folks home here they'd of come to the door after you makin' all the hullabaloo, wouldn't they?"

"I guess you're right," conceded Oklahoma reluctantly.

He turned away from the door, heading for the side street. Johnson fell in beside him. He had trailed Oklahoma to the house. They were nearly a full block from the main street when the white clothing of a woman showed up dimly in the darkness. As she came even with them, Oklahoma reached out a hand and stopped her.

"Where's Bob? I saw him going toward your house earlier, but I was just there and couldn't find him."

"Bob?" Clara Haywalk took a little time to get her breath. "I don't know. I imagine not finding me home he went back downtown. I expect him at the house after a bit."

"So? Is Butch Cassidy hiding out there?"

"Cassidy—my house?" Clara laughed jerkily. "Don't be silly. Cassidy isn't in Hackberry."

"Is there something to this tale I hear about Cassidy cutting and running to Kansas?

"Kansas?" The girl sounded puzzled. "I don't know. He told me he was going to Texas. Crossing the river at Adobe. You are sure you heard he was riding north?"

"Well, maybe I did hear wrong. Tell you what, I'll be back after awhile to talk to you and Bob. See you then."

Oklahoma and Johnson walked on. "How come you're leaving your job?" Oklahoma wanted to know. "Got orders to follow me around to see I don't fall down and stub my toes?"

"She's your sister, ain't she?" drawled Johnson. "I figger it's time you took to lookin' after her—which she don't need, bein' plumb able to see to herself Anyhow, I'm needin' the fresh air. Been cooped up too long for my own good."

BESS had probably given Johnson orders to find him and stick with him until the end of the business here. Oklahoma had told them little of the situation, yet they could guess from his attitude he was on the wind-up trail. Either that or else they suspected he meant to wipe out the gang responsible for harming Bess. In any event, Oklahoma was on the prowl.

Oklahoma set off up the street toward the livery barn. Johnson fell in beside him. At the barn Johnson called for his horse when Oklahoma did. Oklahoma took a fresh mount and saddled up.

They rode around Hackberry by circling far to the west, then cut southward to the narrow Adobe bridge. Here Oklahoma examined the road bed, but found nothing promising. They camped for the rest of the night not far from the bridge.

Both were astir in the first grayness of the new day. A column of smoke rose above the chimney of the Adobe store. There were no horses visible about the place. Oklahoma and Johnson passed over the bridge and rode up before the adobe structure. To Oklahoma's surprise the door was partly open. He shoved it wider and entered. The storekeeper recognized him instantly. He glanced across the room towards the two tall

mustached men. Both were armed, and black hats were pulled down over their foreheads. One quick glance told Oklahoma that here were no members of Cassidy's gang. More than likely they were Rangers.

"We'll take breakfast of crackers and tinned meat," drawled Oklahoma.

"I'll throw in the water," replied the storekeeper, grinning. "Uh — Kildare, ain't seen you around since we pulled Marshal Oldyrod's body out of the river that day."

Oklahoma inclined his head toward the two men, saw the tenseness ease out of them. The men were Texas Rangers all right. The storekeeper's speech had placed Oklahoma for them. Presently Oklahoma would know their business here on the river.

Johnson and Oklahoma turned to on their breakfast. One of the Rangers strolled casually over to the door.

"Three riders comin' across the bridge from the north," he remarked.

Oklahoma smiled. "I thought there would be riders showing up looking for me," he observed.

The three riders approaching over the Red River bridge did not disconcert Oklahoma and Johnson. They proceeded with their breakfast leisurely until the clatter of riders sounded in front of the place.

A man came up under the porch and stopped. He was not joined at once by his companions. They went around to the side of the building. A minute or so later their boots thudded on the boards as they returned. The man who had waited on the porch said something shortly, then came in quickly, followed by the others.

The three men spread out. They had at once spotted the position of every man in the room, giving the Rangers no particular attention because they did not know who they were. Oklahoma drew their eyes. They converged mainly on him.

Johnson had moved across the floor to a spot opposite Oklahoma. The new arrivals did not at first catch on to him. Finally, as the group slowed to a stop the man on the far end of the line recognized Johnson as Oklahoma Kildare's frequent companion in Hackberry. He turned partly aside to take care of him.

Oklahoma regarded the three without expressing undue interest. He guessed why they were here. They were a part of Cassidy's Texas gang that had been rampaging around on Wichita Creek.

"Wal, you oughta know what happens to fellers that stick a nose in other people's business," the man nearest Oklahoma finally drawled. "The other one got it kind of close, too."

His words, apparently, were a signal. By the time the last fell from his lips the trio was dragging guns from leather.

Oklahoma sprang toward the man nearest him as the fellow's gun spat a bullet into the counter where he had been an instant before. He shot once as he moved, and caught the toppling body his fire got in his arms, whirled in behind it as protection against the gunfire of the next man.

JOHNSON, too, had gone into speedy action. He got the man close to him, sent a second bullet into him to make sure and came cat-footed toward the last of the outlaws intent on getting Oklahoma. Even as Johnson moved the two Rangers had moved forward with guns drawn, but there was no need now of their entering the fight. The last of the attacking trio of killers had dropped to the floor.

"Well, ain't much of a mornin's work," drawled Johnson, and the two Rangers glanced at him and grinned.

"We heard of a ruckus goin' on acrost the river," one of them said to Oklahoma. "So me and my pard come over to hang around in case you fellers had a notion of chasin' any badmen into Texas. These here that just met with calamity follered you over the river. I figger you're lucky to get off this easy, fellers."

"Bad business," Oklahoma told him. "For all we know, with these men dead we may never know who killed Oldyrod. Still and all, I reckon we couldn't have forced any of them to talk."

"Maybe they killed him," suggested one of the Rangers. "With them knowin' you're after Oldyrod's killer, looks like they was plumb anxious to get rid of you. . . . How about Sontag? He around?"

"Sontag and Sheriff Pepperin were

ambushed yesterday," Oklahoma said soberly, "Sontag isn't hurt much, but Pepperin will have a hard time pulling through."

"Hmm—how you doing with the outlaw gang? 'Bout got them corralled?"

"Just about. The gang is splitting fast —and dying off. Just the same, it isn't a bad idea for you Rangers to watch this side of the river. A few of the gang are bound to get away. We ain't accounted for Cassidy yet, either, and he's the big boss."

Oklahoma and Johnson rode back to Hackberry. There hovered over the territorial town an air of lassitude. Nothing seemed to be going on. When the two entered the Kansas Trail House it was empty except for two men who were mopping up. There seemed little for the cleaners to do, so evidently the previous night there had been few customers. The signs told Oklahoma that the Texas riders were no longer around Hackberry.

"Wish you'd go talk to Bess," he said to Johnson. "Maybe she can tell us if there was much going on in town last night. While you're there I'll go see Clara Haywalk. We got to pick up a lead on those robbers and killers and get started. I see no signs of life about the sheriff's office, so the head deputy hasn't returned to town since he and his posse went after the men who shot Pepperin and Sontag."

Arriving at Clara Haywalk's house, Oklahoma noticed at once the marks of buckboard wheels on the ground. The door opened readily to Oklahoma's touch. Entering, he looked around, glanced into the bedrooms. The beds were all made. Apparently no one had slept here the night before.

Maybe Bob Haywalk, after all, managed to get his sister to leave for Kansas immediately. Oklahoma hoped so. Then he entered the kitchen. The signs of disturbance here were not many, but still enough to warn him that all had not been well here. Short lengths of small rope cluttered the floor. A recently painted chair showed marks where rope had been tied about the rounds, while on the floor beside the chair were a few drops of dried blood. Oklahoma hurriedly left the house, certain that the Haywalks had been taken prisoners, and that they had been removed from town in a buckboard.

Johnson was standing before the Caddo House when Oklahoma hurried into the main street.

"Miss Bess ain't here," Johnson said worriedly. "The clerk says she went out last night right after I did, and he ain't seen her since."

Oklahoma strode rapidly into the hotel and up to his sister's room. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed. The money was still cached where Oklahoma had placed it. But of Bess Kildare there was no trace.

"They got her!" Oklahoma said slowly. Hurrying back to the street, Oklahoma rapidly explained about the Haywalk house. They would go follow the buckboard tracks, see where that would lead them.

Oklahoma and Johnson forked their horses and rode to Clara Haywalk's house. Picking up the wheel marks of the buckboard, they trailed it out of town. They did not proceed far before they found hoof prints and wheel marks of the buckboard returning. Both men drew rein.

"They didn't go far or else they had plenty of time to go and come from wherever they went before we knew about it," averred Oklahoma.

THEY took up the returning wheel impressions, which turned off into another wagon road, entered a small street and went down to the feed lot on which Oklahoma already had cast a suspicious eye. The buckboard had been driven through a gate into the lot. It stood empty near the wall, harness thrown over the shafts.

Oklahoma walked through the barn to the front. The hostler was working near the office.

"Come back here and tell us about this buckboard," Oklahoma called to him. "Who took it out last night and brought it back before daylight?"

"Uh, I rented it," the man said. "I don't rightly recall the name of the man. And I dunno where he went."

"Mean to say you rent buckboards and horses to people you don't know? Try

another lie, mister!"

The man made a pretense of deep thought. "I think the feller's name is Snivens. I've seen him around Hackberry a lot. Yeah, I'm pretty shore his name is Snivens."

"Your memory's getting better," Oklahoma drawled. "Think some more and tell us when this Snivens went and how many horses he took out of here?"

"Why — uh — he rented three saddle hosses. He promised to be back some time today."

"You're lying! Look here, you're already in plenty of trouble for we know more about this feed lot than you guess. As a matter of fact you're only running it for Cassidy!" He saw the man's face pale. "You'd better come clean. Who owns the buckboard and the horses this Snivens took out?"

The fellow's face began to look drawn and frightened. He shook, and his eyes looked anxiously from one hard face to the other.

"Oh, all right!" he blurted at last. "Cassidy owns the buckboard and the hosses. He owns the whole barn and feed lot and everything in it. Does that suit you? Don't ask me why he sent Snivens for the rig or for the hosses afterwards. I dunno. You ought to know enough about Butch Cassidy to understand he don't go around tellin' people like me what his business is."

"Where'd they go?"

"How should I know?" gasped out the barnman helplessly. "I jest work here!"

Johnson and Oklahoma returned to their horses. Just as they started to mount Johnson whistled, low. Oklahoma turned his head. A man was riding down the main street. Lather marks on his horse told that this rider had been hours in the saddle.

"That there's the outlaw killer and robber of robbers," said Johnson, "who holed up in the cabin with his wounded pardner!"

VII

THE young outlaw reined in before the Caddo House, his tired face lighting up at sight of Oklahoma.

"I've come in to give myself up," he said. "Kildare, I'm sick and tired of it all, and here I am to tell you everything I know."

"You realize what you're letting yourself in for?" asked Oklahoma.

"And the cost is plumb easy to bear!"

Oklahoma and Johnson swung to the ground. So did the outlaw. Entering the hotel they sat down in a corner of the lobby where they would not be disturbed. The outlaw rolled a quirly.

"My pard died yesterday," he began then. "I buried him under the floor of the cabin. So now I don't care much about anything but seein' to it that his killers get theirs. They's a big posse runnin' wild over the country up there lookin' for the bunch who bushwhacked Sheriff Pepperin and this Marshal Sontag. I've spent plenty hours keepin' away from them myself before I could light out for town. Oklahoma, I wanted to surrender to you on account of I knowed I'd get a square deal and you'd use what I'm gonna tell better than anyone else would."

"Make it short to me," Oklahoma said. "I'm in a hurry. You can give Sontag all the details later."

"All right. Well, I guess you've been workin' on this business long enough to know what's up, Kildare. Cassidy and Waddroups figgered out a scheme to get away with robbin' trains and banks in Kansas. They got hidin' places along the trail through the Territory all the way to the Kansas line. When the robbery is pulled off the loot is turned over to a relay to fetch it down to Cassidy. By that time the real robbers are headin' a couple of hundred miles in the wrong direction to throw the law off the trail.

"That brings it down to me an' my pard. We pulled our robbery and turned it over to the relay men. They was to fetch the dinero straight to Hackberry as usual for the divvy when us that done the job got here.

"This was one time things didn't go off accordin' to plan. Marshal Oldyrod being killed here, and bein' so close to the truth of things, scared everybody bad. It looked like the Federals were on to everything. Also no more herds was comin' up the trail to Kansas this season which cut down the gamblin' and likker

business bad, so Cassidy and Waddroups got the idea to doublecross their helpers and quit the country with all the loot for themselves. This was how they worked it. When the men who pulled the jobs got to Hackberry they were told the law was onto the relay men and everybody had to hunt cover quick. Usually the boys pulled out soon as they could change saddles to a fresh hoss.

"A month or so before me and my pard went up the trail, a friend of ours pulled one of these robberies. Waddroups handled the northern end while Cassidy took care of the pay-offs. They must have pulled their first crooked deal on our friend. He got no divvy on the job he helped do. He was suspicious they'd all been doublecrossed. Me and my pard got a letter from him in Dodge tellin' us all about the deal and what he thought really happened.

"So when Ben Waddroups wanted us to come in on a train hold-up he had planned, me and my pard went in — with some ideas of our own. We got picked as the men to turn the loot over to the relay riders. We pulled the robbery off slick as a whistle and did turn over the loot to the relay riders and struck out west like we was told to do. But we come right back and follered 'em close. They rode at night, puttin' up in the camps durin' the day. Then we stopped them two relay men one night. They didn't have a single dollar of anybody's money on them!"

THE young outlaw tossed away his cigarette butt and rolled another smoke.

"Right off me and my pard set our minds not to let them get away with it," he resumed. "We chased them boys down the line, then doubled back expectin' to run into other riders who would be carryin' the money. No luck. We checked the whole trail and finally saw a bunch we thought might be the right one, but they was too many for us to tackle. So we watched them and around Wichita Creek things began to happen. The gang was split up. Then comes the gal in the buckboard. We overheard her say she had been sent by Cassidy to get the stuff and fetch it the rest of the way. Waddroups for some reason didn't like the idea. Neither did me or my pard. We thought she had it, and we overhauled her, but she didn't. We had to make her prisoner to keep her from givin' us away until we'd got our hands on the loot. I'm sorry she kicked the lamp over and like to of burned herself up.

"Well, then we doubled back and rode in on the three men in the timber, campin'. We accused them and they opened the fight. My pard was shot fatal, but we got all three of them. Then we uncovered the loot — and it was about a third of what there should of been. It had been whacked up somewhere, by Ben Waddroups, we figgered. I believe he's been cuttin' it down all the time before it ever got into Cassidy's hands. . . . There she is, the whole tale, and I shore hope it'll convict Cassidy and Waddroups. They caused my pardner's death."

Oklahoma asked a few questions about Oldyrod's death. All of the outlaws knew of it, but none of them appeared to know the details, nor who had killed the marshal. But all were sure Cassidy had given the orders for his death. The man who "caved" to Oldyrod was dead and buried, but the young outlaw did not know where.

"Snivens does, though," he said. "I heard him tell some of the boys in camp it wasn't far from that farm house."

When Oklahoma suggested that this Snivens might actually be Oldyrod's killer, the young outlaw started.

"Come to think of it, I reckon you're right," he said tensely. "Snivens seemed to know a heap about it, just only to have been told about it!"

Did he have any idea where Cassidy or Waddroups would be hiding out?

The young fellow did not. However, he had heard from the gang that Cassidy owned other hide-outs in the Territory besides those along the trail down which his night riding relay men brought the loot.

"I remember somethin' about a cave," he said. "Though I don't rightly have any idea where it could be found."

"Now look," said Oklahoma, "I'll be taking you to Marshal Sontag, but I

want you to know that we can't promise you anything. All Sontag will be able to do is go into court after you're tried and put in a personal plea for a light sentence. You savvy that?"

The outlaw nodded. He reiterated that all he wanted was revenge on Cassidy and Waddroups.

After Oklahoma had escorted the surrendering outlaw to Bateman's house he rejoined Arizona at the livery barn where the outlaw's jaded horse would be cared for. They forked their own mounts and rode down to a grocery store where they purchased a few emergency rations, then went back to the trail of the buckboard and began following it.

It led them north into the timbered hills, then west, then north again toward the course of Wichita Creek. Here the barren, baked clay ground afforded little sign of marks of wheel tires or iron-shod hoofs. Oklahoma quickly noted that the man named Snivens, after returning the buckboard to the barn, had not brought the saddled horses back over the same route. Snivens must have come a more direct way and for obvious reasons the buckboard had followed a roundabout course.

That a buckboard had been brought out at all indicated definitely that there had been prisoners along. One of them would fight every time he got a chance. That would be Bob Haywalk. It would not surprise Oklahoma if the young fellow didn't have a bullet through his head by now.

"We're wasting time," he told Arizona. "Let's hit for the creek."

NOT far from Wichita Creek, as Oklahoma surmised, the buckboard had been forced to stop. Footprints led from there along the bank, then over and down. No horse tracks other than those made by the buckboard team could be found.

After looking the scene over Oklahoma and Johnson hid their mounts and, traveling single file over the rocks, dropped over the creek bank onto a pile of driftwood. The wood held all the appearance of having been deposited against the high mud bank by water, yet here and there were marks which showed part of the wood had been handled by men. Sign had been carefully erased yet the logs and debris against the bank gave certain evidence that human agency and not flood tide entirely had put it there. In addition, many boots had cut the wet soil of the creek bottom.

Grinning, Oklahoma said, "We'll see what's hidden there." He and Johnson moved some of the pile of drift aside, disclosing a mud-plastered door in the side of the vertical bank. Oklahoma stood to one side and pushed it open. Nothing happened. Lifting his gun he tensed, and entered the cave in a rush, Johnson behind him. The two stood to one side, accustoming their eyes to the gloom, before setting out to search the place.

Johnson walked over to the far wall, finding it by feeling with his hands. He went along it until something obstructed his passage. Johnson struck a match.

"Oklahoma," he called out, excitement in his raspy voice. "Come here!"

Bess Kildare lay gagged and bound on a blanket, her eyes looking up at Johnson standing over her.

Oklahoma lighted and held a lantern while Johnson cut the ropes binding Bess' hands and feet. In a few moments she was telling her story. That night after Oklahoma had left the Caddo House she had begged Arizona to follow him and stay with him.

"I could see by his eyes he's looking for trouble," she had pleaded.

Johnson had left, but he had hardly passed through the door before Bess, still uneasy, had resolved to follow. From a safe distance to the rear she had watched Arizona trail her brother to Clara Haywalk's house, had seen Oklahoma hammering on the door. Then, as the two men had started away, coming in her direction, she had hurriedly made for the tall weeds beyond the road and had cast herself flat on the ground, to avoid being seen.

But as the minutes had ticked off, and no footsteps had come nearer, at last she had felt it safe to reconnoitre. She heard the door to Clara Haywalk's house open and close, then a small tear in a window shade showed that a lamp had been lighted within. Oklahoma and Arizona,

she had decided, must have returned to the house and, finally arousing someone, had been admitted.

But when she had precipitately flung open the unlocked door, Oklahoma and Johnson had not been there. Instead she had seen a young cowboy sitting bound in a chair, with Clara, her face white and drawn, standing near him. To Bess' right had stood Butch Cassidy, with one of his men, smiling oilily.

"Why, how'de do!" Cassidy had exclaimed. "We're plumb glad to see you, Miss Kildare. You bring that brother of yours along?"

Bess had turned to go. Into the door had slid a second Cassidy man.

"Let her go, Butch," Clara had spoken up. "She just stumbled in here accidentally."

"Think I'm gonna believe that?" Cassidy had snarled. "We been double-crossed somewheres."

"I have done you no wrong," Clara had insisted. "It wasn't my fault the mix-up happened on the trail. Maybe Ben Waddroups can explain it."

"Maybe he knows more than you do. We'll see when Ben comes in to the cave on the creek. The buckboard will be here pronto to take us there, and we're takin' you three along, where I can keep my hands on you."

So, bound securely, they had been taken to the cave on Wichita Creek, where Oklahoma and Arizona had just found her.

The buckboard had been sent back to town, while Cassidy and his other minion remained to await the arrival of Waddroups.

HOURS passed, and still Ben Waddroups did not appear. Then into the cave stumbled Snivens, who had returned the buckboard to town. A few minutes later another man had entered the cave with a rush, another of Cassidy's men. He had left Hackberry to go north along the trail with Ben Waddroups days before.

"Butch," he had cried excitedly, "there's funny things afoot!"

"Take it easy," Cassidy had growled, "so's you can tell it straight. Ben sent you to me with a message, didn't he?"

"Ben Waddroups send me?" The outlaw had chortled without mirth. "He did not! That's part of the odd business. Butch, I come on my own without anybody's say-so, because I figger what's goin' on is the business of us all!"

"Now we're gonna hear what I been suspicionin' all along," Snivens had spoken up drily. "Ben's givin' us the run-'round!"

"I don't believe it!" snapped out Cassidy, then to the messenger, "Carter, talk fast!"

"Shore, and I reckon Snivens is right to a T!" exclaimed Carter. "Look, Butch, we never did come up with that dinero that was on the trail. So we lit a shuck for Kansas to see what's wrong with it. Ben starts actin' funny. Like he ain't too anxious to catch up with them fellers holdin' the loot they should of fetched down the trail. At the first hideout south of the line Ben insists on stoppin' over. He takes the feller there outside to the barn. I go there to do some feedin', quiet, and I sees Ben and the hombre takin' up the floor of the corn crib. I'm watchin' through a crack and see them take shovels and do some diggin'. I hear Ben start cussin' when they bring up some empty boxes an' a couple of sacks.

" 'Somebody's got all the dinero we had cached here,' says Ben. 'Now I wonder who?'

" 'Ain' no need guessin',' says your station keeper. 'It was them boys you told to come here and wait for you to show. I noticed they monkeyed around the barn a lot but never paid them no mind 'count of I figgered them to be your men and not the regular gang.'

" 'The hell you did!' cried Ben. 'They wasn't nobody else supposed to know about this loot buried here 'ceptin' you and me. They found it, took it, and are runnin' away with it as well as that from the last train hold-up! Come to think of it, maybe you had a hand in the job!'

"Butch, that there feller got down on his knees, beggin'. He thought Ben was gonna kill him right there. I thought so, too. But no, the feller talked him out of it. I hightailed it back to the house and was there with the others when Ben, all worked up, comes in. He said to get

the hosses, as we was hittin' the trail on into Kansas.

"Now, Butch, I dunno the inside workin's of your business, but it shore looked to me like Ben was pullin' something crooked on his own. I didn't get no chance to talk to my pard, Pete, until we got clear into Abilene. I told him what I'd seen. He says lay off until we know more. Maybe Ben is on the up-and-up, and if so, purty soon he'll be sendin' some of us down the trail with a message for you."

Carter had wet his throat again, and began rolling a smoke.

"Go on!" Cassidy had shouted at him.

"Shore. Well, Ben had plenty of lines out in Abilene. He left us and went lookin'. Purty soon he comes up with the word the boys we're lookin' for is over on a ranch hidin' out east of town. We go there but don't find nobody 'ceptin' one of them shot up so bad he couldn't travel no more. Ben went to work on him an' it wasn't no purty sight when he got through.

"What the wounded feller told was that there had been loot buried at the first way station. The gang found it, took it and also what they was carryin' and went back into Kansas. They hid out a few days on the ranch and fixed up a plan of their own to get away with it all for themselves. They was afraid to cross the Territory, and was figgerin' how far west and north they'd have to ride to get around us down over the line without gettin' caught either by some of us or by the law, which would be bad, with all that loot on them.

CASSIDY had growled in his throat for the man to go on.

"Then some of them thought about the train," Carter said. "The upshot is they agreed to travel two hundred miles east along the railroad, sell their hosses and ride the cars acrost the Territory. We wouldn't be expectin' such a move. They agreed to take the Rock Island some time tonight. But Ben, after he shot that wounded feller dead, made some plans of his own. Ben figgered out we had time to get as far into the Territory as Red Rock, which he said would be the only place we could safely hold up the train, kill them doublecrossers, grab the loot and get away with it.

"Accordin' to Ben the train won't get into Abilene until around noon today. It stays there until the track is cleared ahead into the Texas Panhandle. The road bed ain't in good shape and some heavy freights must come through Abilene while the passenger train is on the side track. The passenger is due at Red Rock around nine o'clock at night. That's when Ben and the others aim to hit it.

"Me and Pete talked it over durin' the ride back into the Territory. At no time did Ben say anything about lettin' you know about the deal. Pete and me decided he wasn't ever aimin' to, which looks bad. When we got far enough in I faked my hoss had a crippled foot. Shore, it was risky and I thought for a moment Ben was gonna shoot me. Finally he told me to hang around and come daylight to steal me a hoss and come on to where they'd be waitin' in camp near Red Rock station. Soon as they got down the line I uncorked the lameness out of my hoss an' lit out for here. That's the story and the truth, Butch!"

"Cassidy," said Bess, "had shown that he was thinking swiftly."

"You fellers listen to me," he had rumbled then. "This money Ben had buried at the first way station I didn't know about. For quite a spell now I been suspicionin' the loot comin' down to me for the split with the boys was bein' cut down. It could only of been done at the first relay station. The hombre there was in cahoots with Ben. He cut it, buried it in the barn, with him and Ben aimin' to split later. That shows Ben has doublecrossed us all. Don't worry about Ben not takin' the loot away from them fellers on the train. He will, but he won't be comin' this way to split with us.

"So here's what we do. We fork our hosses and get goin' for Red Rock. We'll pull a robbery of our own! Also — he had added this with a malicious grin — "we'll take Clara and her brother along with us.

He inclined his head in her direction. "When we face Ben we'll damn soon find out if she has been slipping him information."

Oklahoma and Arizona had listened intently.

"Almost the same sort of crooked stuff we learned from that cowboy who surrendered," Oklahoma remarked when Bess had finished. "Well, we know what will happen. They'll let Waddroups rob the train and get back the loot those other outlaws have. Ben and his gang will line them up and shoot them down. Then Cassidy will ambush Ben and his men. Our next move is Red Rock. Let's get started!"

VIII

IN SPITE of hard riding the three pursuers failed to reach Red Rock in time to stop the train robbery. Subsequent developments, though, had been exactly as Oklahoma had predicted, except that the ambushing of Ben Waddroups and his men by Cassidy and his followers had not panned out quite as Cassidy had planned.

Oklahoma, Arizona and Bess discoverd this as they approached a bowl-shaped, low-sided basin outside the little town. Oklahoma's eye caught sight of a swiftly moving object ahead. He pulled his horse down and the others reined in.

A rider came into the open, bent over his saddle, clutching the horn.

"Ben Waddroups!" shouted Johnson. "He got away! But he's been shot and wounded!"

Waddroups raced on, flopping about some, but still able to hold himself in the saddle. Presently two other riders broke cover, appearing out in the open — Butch Cassidy and one of his men. They prodded and kicked their mounts, but the run was ragged, choppy. Meanwhile Waddroups was rapidly eating up distance.

A thin smile came to Oklahoma's lips. He could overhaul these men almost any time he chose to. Still, he tarried. Shortly it became evident that of the two rival gangs only these three were still in the running, still able to fight or run away with stolen property if they got the chance. And the first man of the three to get a fresh horse would be the winner in this death race.

The smile on Oklahoma's face turned to a tight, humorless grin. Loosening his bridle reins he rode on for the rim of the bowl. Bess eased back behind him and Arizona. It evidently was Oklahoma's idea to look things over from the rim, then go after the outlaws.

"They ain't got sense enough to get together now, the three that are left," said Oklahoma. "So we got all the time we need. They are blind to all except hanging on to that loot. Each one believes now he'll do in the other two and have it all for himself. Greed alone keeps them from savvying anything else."

When they reached the rim, however, from the west another rider entered the bowl, slowed from a bare walk to a stop and waited. A second rider appeared, came on even with the first and stopped. The two dismounted and started forward leading their horses. Bess immediately recognized them.

"The girl and her brother!" she exclaimed. "They got away somehow. Oh, I'm glad! Neither of them did any wrong."

By then Oklahoma had his hat off, waving the signal indicating friends and for them to come on. Eventually they did. Bob Haywalk's lips parted in a grin of delight.

"We got away!" Clara cried as they stopped. "And I still don't know how we were so lucky!"

"I do," said Bob, and held up burned wrists. "They tied us up good and gagged us, in Waddroups' temporary camp close to the railroad. When they all shot it out and run off I put my tied wrists and hands over a bed of coals. Burned the ropes off."

"I tried my best to get him to go on to Kansas," said his sister. "He wouldn't do it. I was afraid for us to come this way, not knowing when we would run into these devils again. I — I believed Miss Kildare's brother would find the cave and free her before she was there long. I see you did." Her eyes lifted to Oklahoma's face.

Bob told of their troubles briefly. After the gunfight and the flight of the out-

laws, and he had burned himself free, he had caught up two saddled horses, probably belonging to some of Ben Waddroups' men who were killed. From the bodies of the outlaws he helped himself to ammunition, a rifle and a six-gun. Then a brief argument between brother and sister as to their course of flight had ended shortly with Bob pointing in the direction of Hackberry. He wanted to tell his story to Oklahoma Kildare as soon as possible.

Oklahoma nodded, then frowned anxiously as he saw how completely exhausted Bob and his sister appeared to be, not to mention their mounts.

"Look, folks," he said, indicating the Haywalks and Bess, "why don't you all cut across the country toward Hackberry? It will save you a good many miles and a lot of strength by going direct rather than stayin' with Arizona and me while we follow the trail of the outlaws."

BOB HAYWALK'S objection was, that in a region entirely strange to them, they could easily get lost. But he did know of a ranch some miles ahead—the outlaws had given it a wide berth the previous day—and they might be able to get fresh horses there.

"Shore, we're in bad shape," he admitted, "but we're perkin' up and with fresh hosses under us, we can eat up the miles an' get where we're goin' before we tucker out complete."

Oklahoma nodded to his sister. "Stay with them, will you, Bess?"

Bess Kildare smiled. She nodded in agreement. She had known this would be coming.

Oklahoma forged ahead with Arizona Johnson by his side. Behind them the Haywalks mounted. To the surprise of Oklahoma they and Bess did not drop far behind, but came right along. They picked up the outlaws' trail and followed it until they unexpectedly reached a wagon road. Bob Haywalk studied the road.

"Did you cross this yesterday?" Oklahoma asked him.

"It must lead to that ranch we rode around north of," Bob said, considering. "Since we didn't cross it, why it must lead from off the Kansas Trail somewhere to the ranch."

On the crest of a hill to the south of where they sat their saddles to give their mounts a breather, they suddenly became aware of a flurry of sound and movement. A full dozen riders galloped into view. Oklahoma spurred off the hill on the run straight toward the riders below.

"Pepperin's deputy and his posse!" he called, and was abruptly astonished by the action of the lawmen.

Guns swept up to aim level, and bullets spat angrily about the five riders coming down the hill. Oklahoma's horse went down. Bess called out sharply, but she and Clara were unharmed. Johnson escaped too, but Bob Haywalk, like Oklahoma, was forced to fling himself out of his saddle as his mount coughed and dropped. Both horses were dead when they rolled out flat-sided on the ground.

Oklahoma and Bob Haywalk scrambled to their feet, Kildare reaching for his gun. Johnson already had his weapon out. The posse poured around them in a circle, weapons leveled.

Sheriff Pepperin's chief deputy, face mottled and lips snarling, plunged up, his six-gun waving. Then suddenly his expression changed, and the gun fell to his side.

"Boys!" he shouted. "Go easy. These ain't the people we thought they was!"

Oklahoma took a step toward the head of the deputy's horse.

"It's time you found it out," he said hotly. "What was the idea of firing on us? You have put two of us afoot. Two of our party happen to be women. Speak up! You'd better have a good excuse!"

"Yeah?" The deputy frowned. "Kildare, it was a mistake. We figgered you-all was outlaws—maybe the same bunch that ambushed Pepperin and Sontag. So we charged." The deputy laughed easily. "I guess you-all are shore lucky it was only hosses as got killed."

"Think we're lucky, do you?" Oklahoma's voice came silkily soft. "We'll take that up another time. What about mounts, since you shot two of ours?"

"Oh, that's plumb easy. There's a

ranch up the road in good walkin' distance where you can get others. . . . Say, what you doin' here anyhow? Don't you know a big bunch of outlaws passed through here yesterday? We cut their sign and follered it a piece."

"We know it," Oklahoma told him drily. "That particular bunch and another had a big scrap among themselves after Waddroups' gang held up the train at Red Rock. So far as we know there's only Waddroups, Cassidy and another man left now. The last two are chasing Waddroups who is trying to get away with the money accumulated from a dozen holdups in Kansas. We are following them. They can't be far ahead, if your shooting didn't scare them all into hiding. You send a couple of your men over to the ranch on the run for two spare horses and we'll take up the trail again."

The deputy grinned. "You don't need to worry no more about them runaway robbers," he said confidently. "We'll go corral them right now. Come on, boys!"

"What about replacing the horses you killed?" demanded Oklahoma.

"Go on to the ranch an' get them yourself," the deputy threw back over his shoulder. "We'll grab the outlaws."

THE posse rolled on, the deputy riding hard in the lead. Oklahoma Kildare stood in his tracks, his eyes burning slits. The muscles along the sides of his jaw corded.

From his saddle Johnson drawled: "There goes a glory grabber and it's 'excuse it please, we didn't aim to nigh kill you shootin' your hosses out from under you. So-long!' "

Turning to his dead horse, Oklahoma started removing saddle and bridle. Bob Haywalk retrieved his own riding gear. Oklahoma walked to where Johnson sat his saddle and handed up a roll of currency.

"See if you can get us some mounts at the ranch," he told him. "Pay for them and get a receipt so I can collect from Sontag."

Johnson galloped up the road toward the ranch.

The others rested until he returned leading two horses. Oklahoma glanced at the sun, announced it to be noon and suggested they all eat. There were a few provisions left of what he and Johnson had bought in town.

Food restored the strength of all. The Haywalks declared themselves fit to ride for hours more. The new mounts were quickly saddled, and they all rode on.

The trail of Waddroups and his pursuers was quickly picked up. After he got on to the trail Oklahoma suggested the others follow at a distance. Ambush might well await them, especially if Waddroups' pursuers had been close enough to hear the shooting by the posse. Oklahoma believed even Waddroups, as swiftly as he was riding, could not have been beyond sound of the gunfire.

Less than a mile from the wagon road Cassidy and his remaining man, riding at a walk as shown by the sign, suddenly had spurted forward. Here, Oklahoma decided when he reached the spot, was were they were when the posse opened fire. The outbreak of shots had warned them there were others in the vicinity. Cassidy and his companion had promptly quit chasing Waddroups and headed directly for a stand of persimmons on the side of the nearest hill.

Oklahoma turned in the same direction, riding halfway to the green trees before halting. Gravely he studied the persimmon trees. Nothing moved among them that he could see. Oklahoma rode closer and discovered the body of a horse, its riding equipment still on. The tracks of another horse going away showed the animal did not carry double. Making up his mind to find out about the man who had been left behind, Oklahoma dashed toward the trees in a sudden spurt.

A dozen feet inside the clump the body of a man lay face-down on the ground. Dismounting, Oklahoma went forward afoot with his gun ready. But on the edge of the clump of trees, looking down on the body of the man, he stopped abruptly. The body was not that of Cassidy. Oklahoma signaled the others to approach. Clara Haywalk recognized the dead man as Snivens.

"It's between Cassidy and Waddroups now, eh?" muttered Johnson. "And the show-down hand is gonna be played

before sunset!"

Oklahoma grinned, nodded. He thought so, too, but the day had not much longer to last, as a glance at the sun convinced him. He left the trees first, riding directly to the point where he crossed the trail Cassidy had made coming away. From there on Cassidy had continued to gallop his tired horse, even after he put intervening small hills between himself and where Snivens lay. The outlaw-saloonman's horse could not last much longer.

Still, unexpectedly, the horse Cassidy was riding not only managed to keep going for a considerable distance, but it actually kept on at the same jerky gallop. Cassidy's course took him over Waddroups' trail.

At last, however, Oklahoma came upon Cassidy's horse. The animal had finally fallen from exhaustion. Foot tracks led away from it. They had been made by Cassidy going off through timber at a run.

The sun was going down fast. Oklahoma knew he must now watch even closer for ambush. Still he proceeded fast through the timber, ignoring possible danger. Presently the farmhouse and the barn of the way station appeared through the trees.

A RUNNING figure showed up just short of the barn. Oklahoma dashed to the edge of the timber line. The man fell to the ground. He scrambled to his feet again, got past the barn and started for the house. When he came out in the better light Oklahoma recognized the man definitely as Butch Cassidy. From the way he ran, stopped, and then went ahead once more, plainly the outlaw was about at the end of his rope.

Cassidy slowed down one final time short of the door. He called out, only a faint echo of his voice reaching Oklahoma. Cassidy had his head down as he started through the door. Abruptly his body seemed to bulge backward at the middle. He fell off the threshold and rolled over on the ground. A man's leg and boot came through the door far enough to be seen. Cassidy was being kicked out of one of his own way stations!

Cassidy came leaping up from the ground, clawing his gun out of holster. Instantly a gun cracked out in the doorway. Two bullets ploughed into Cassidy's chest. Cassidy pitched over on his back, dead.

While the shooting was going on Oklahoma sent his horse on out into the open until the sight of a man coming out in the yard stopped him. It was Waddroups. He stood over Cassidy's body, nudging it with his boot toe. Seemingly satisfied by the finish of his former partner, he turned back inside the house. During all the time he was in the yard he did not raise his head to look around.

Oklahoma sent his horse into a dead run. Passing the corner of the lot he caught a fleeting glimpse of a horse standing on weak legs, head down. Waddroups had been here long enough to get a fresh horse and to doctor himself.

Coming close to Cassidy's body Oklahoma quit his saddle in motion. Drawing his gun as he reached the door he dashed inside. There was no one in the back part of the house, or in the front room. As Oklahoma raced for the front of the house, he heard the thunder of hoofs striking the hard road outside.

He dashed through the door, reached the porch in time to see Waddroups racing down the road well out of gun range. The outlaw-gambler looked over his shoulder, saw Oklahoma standing there in the falling dusk and turned from the road into the timber.

Oklahoma holstered his weapon, turned to reenter the house. A rifle bullet just missed his head, splintering into the wooden front wall. Instantly he ducked in through the door, turned along the wall to peer out of the window. Except for the one shot no others came. Riders dashed out of the timber into the road and surrounded the house. Smiling tightly, Oklahoma let his half-drawn gun rest.

The hot-headed deputy with his posse!

Noise echoed out in back of the place. This was added to as some of the lawmen reached there. Oklahoma waited, wondering if Bess and Johnson and the others would be shot at a second time

this day. Voices arose. Oklahoma relaxed. The lawmen there were not so jumpy as their leader.

Boot heels sounded on the front porch. A man ran around from the side to call out to the deputy that the people now at the way station were those they had seen with Kildare earlier. Oklahoma heard the chief deputy curse. He stamped into the front room of the house with most of his men at his heels, just as Johnson and Bess preceded the Haywalks through the back of the house into the room.

"Wal, what're you folks doin' here?" demanded the deputy.

"I'll tell you!" spoke up Bob Haywalk. "Kildare trailed Cassidy and Waddroups right to here after Cassidy killed Snivens. That's more than you could do!"

"What?" cried the deputy. "I don't believe—"

"Reckon it's true," said a lawman who came in behind the Haywalks. "Cassidy is lyin' dead out in the yard."

"Waddroups got here first," Oklahoma explained drily. "He shot Cassidy when he ran up. Now Waddroups has gone away on a fresh horse."

"He has, eh?" snapped the deputy. "See here, Kildare, when we gonna work together on this chase? When we gonna get somethin' done?"

"Right now," was the reply. "To sort of start in, here's what you've had coming since this morning!"

Oklahoma took one step aside, turned and drove his right arm out fast. The clenched fist sank under the deputy's jaw. The officer groaned once as he flopped down on the floor.

Oklahoma flexed his hand. Several of the cowboys making up the posse laughed.

"He shore had it comin'," one of them said. "Somebody fetch a little water to pour on his face. Dagnab him anyhow!"

IX

WATER was brought and sloshed over the head of the deputy, who soon sat up, but so dazed that all his belligerence had disappeared—for that day, at least. Oklahoma never glanced at him.

Bob Haywalk pushed his way forward, halting short of Oklahoma.

"Say," Bob said eagerly, as if a sudden thought had just come to him, "I betcha Ben Waddroups run for that cave on the creek, and thinks he's holed up in a nice safe place. Likely thinks we don't know about it—or wouldn't go back there to look for him."

The possemen tensed. Even the deputy's face took on a sudden interest.

"What's this about a cave?" he demanded.

Bob quickly explained about the cave in the bank of the creek, and how he and the girls had been taken there. He was going on to tell how they had started off on the trail, but the deputy was not interested in what had happened to them afterward. He was once more on the scent of the sole survivor of the outlaw gang. Breaking off Bob's story he demanded and received instructions on how to find the cave.

"Come on, boys!" he cried as he shook off water and scrambled to his feet. "Let's get goin'!"

Hurriedly the posse departed. Bob Haywalk began chuckling.

"I reckoned that would take the pesky critters away from here," he commented.

"Yes, and the cave is the least likely place for Waddroups to go," drawled Arizona Johnson. "I hope them lawmen are so plumb put out they get mad and tell that know-it-all deputy to go chase hisself. . . . Oklahoma, I notice you still ain't in no tolerable hurry. You got some idea of your own where Ben Waddroups is goin' to hole hisself up at?"

"Waddroups is wounded," said Oklahoma thoughtfully. "He can't go far without stopping to care for his wounds. He's from Texas, knows the country well, of course, and Texas now is close. A matter of getting beyond Hackberry to the bridge. Now I've been thinking—I remember seeing some military telegraph wires going across the river at Adobe. There'll be a receiving station near enough to the store to get word to the Rangers there in time to stop him if he tries to make it by way of the bridge. Yes, I guess that is the best way. I'll send them warning. They will be waiting when he gets over the bridge."

They left Cassidy's way station

shortly, but full night had settled down when they reached Hackberry. On arriving, Bob and his sister were dropped off at Clara Haywalk's house, with Clara vowing that they would both be starting for Kansas in the morning. Bess was left at the Caddo House, with a stern admonition to stay there, while Johnson went to stable the horses. Oklahoma hurried to the military telegraph office, where the sergeant in charge assured him that they could reach the Rangers at Adobe. The sergeant pointed to a red triangle on a large map on the wall.

"A Ranger headquarters there," he said. "Established it when they went to work grubbing out a nest of river outlaws last summer."

Oklahoma wrote his message to the Rangers, warning them that Ben Waddroups was headed in their direction. He would probably try to cross the river via the bridge.

When Oklahoma returned to the street he walked fast to Commissioner Bateman's residence. Bateman appeared at the door and greeted him. Sontag sat in the living room, with quilts and pillows piled about him in the chair. He had not recovered as quickly or as easily as he had been expected. In the room also were two strangers wearing badges. Sontag introduced them as deputy marshals.

"Say, the wires have been running news of a hold-up at Red Rock," Sontag said interestedly. "Kildare, the story is that a gang led by Ben Waddroups held up the train there, shot down some men who are believed to have been members of the same gang, took a sack of loot from other robberies from them, and robbed the passengers on the train. When they were making their getaway, some other rebel members of the outlaw gang were waiting in ambush for them. There was a big fight. Few of the outlaws got away.

"Also we have the story of Oldyrod's case about complete. It's a pretty set-up. Texas cowboys who had taken the owlhoot trail were used to pull the robberies in Kansas. They would make a wild stab at throwing off pursuit by heading in one direction, while the loot they took was brought south to Cassidy's place by another. The robbers having then thrown the law off the scent came through here, collected and went on home or about their business. Cassidy is named as the head of the gang and pay-off man. Waddroups planned the train robberies besides furnishing the men to do it."

OKLAHOMA was nodding as the Federal marshal spoke. He then rapidly related to Sontag all he had uncovered about the case, including the information gained by Bess when she had heard Cassidy and his men discussing Ben Waddroups in the cave. The men in the room listened intently. Several times heads nodded.

The picture was, as Sontag said, complete now. Oldyrod, of course, had managed to uncover the workings of the gang. In his usual lone wolf style he had held his reports out until the case should be solved, and the entire outlaw gang in jail. Unfortunately his activities were discovered by the gang and he was killed before he could get his warrants and make his arrests.

"A man named Snivens did the actual killing of Olydrod, although there was others along," said Sontag. "Say, that head bartender at Cassidy's Kansas Trail House is a mine of information about the gang. Now, Kildare, we'll find Cassidy's body on Wichita Creek, you say? And only Waddroups is left. Hmm. Doesn't seem like we're going to have anyone to try in federal court."

"I reckon that's the way of it," Oklahoma said, as he rose. "How is Pepperin?"

"He's going to make it, the doctor says."

"I'm mighty glad of that. Pepperin's a fine man, and a good sheriff. . . . Sontag, I told you, didn't I, that the Rangers have been warned? If Waddroups tries to get over the river they'll take him. Waddroups is wounded and he is carrying a huge amount of stolen money and jewelry and the like in a sack. I'll turn over to you a small bunch of money taken in one robbery that has been recovered. I've got it hid at the hotel."

"That's fine, Kildare. We still couldn't interest you in a job with us? Judge Cantrel, your old friend, says he could use you in his district."

Oklahoma shook his head. He said good night all around, passed out of the house to the sidewalk, and started walking slowly down the street toward the Caddo House. Once he looked back over his shoulder at the light in the Bateman house. The form of a tall man passed between him and the light in the house. Oklahoma stopped, turning quickly. He saw the man again. He walked up on the porch and through the door without knocking.

The man was Ben Waddroups! Oklahoma raced back to the house. His fingers touched the edge of the screen door. He must not open it fast for the slightest noise would warn Waddroups. Ever so slowly, he began edging the door open.

Waddroups' entrance into the house so soon after Oklahoma took his leave had caused the men inside to believe he might be returning. The outlaw got well into the room before they discovered the difference. By then it was too late. The gambler had the gun drop on them.

"I'm cashin' in, Bateman," Waddroups was saying as Oklahoma inched the door open. "I die if I try to ride more. I die if I don't. So what? Here's what, damn you! I'm sending you along to join Oldyrod. And your pards here. I sort of like to shoot deputy marshals! Well here's where you get yours!"

Oklahoma slammed the screen door all the way back. He leaped into the hall and aimed at Waddroups through the living room door. Waddroups turned his head sluggishly. Oklahoma saw his face was like that of a corpse.

"Take it slow, Waddroups!" Oklahoma barked. "I've got you covered and can shoot before you get your gun around. Drop it!"

The dead-like eyes kindled a brief light. One deputy marshal came catfooted across the rug.

"It's—" began Waddroups. The deputy grabbed him by the shoulders and flung him to the floor. The outlaw's gun erupted once, the bullet going into the wall.

Waddroups offered no further resistance. His body relaxed and he lay still, eyes closed. Oklahoma holstered his own gun. The others hastened over to where Waddroups lay. Sontag sent one of them on the run for the doctor, but it was obvious that Ben Waddroups had correctly diagnosed his own condition.

BATEMAN picked up a canvas sack from the floor behind where Waddroups had been standing. "He brought this with him. I wonder why?"

Bateman dumped the contents of the bag out on the floor. Some of the packages of currency still had the original wrappers on them. Here also was jewelry, and what had been taken from the passengers on the train at Red Rock, as well as the booty that had been wrested from the fleeing outlaws on the train.

The deputy marshal returned with the doctor. The doctor examined the outlaw, only to get to his feet shaking his head. Ben Waddroups was dying. Oklahoma turned toward the door.

"We'll meet at my office and go over the entire case tomorrow morning," Bateman called out to him. "We'll need you to straighten out some of the details. You'll be there?"

Nodding, Oklahoma left. He thought of the Texas Rangers, and remembered they should be informed of the outlaw's capture. Proceeding to the telegraph office he sent the necessary message. Then he went on to the Caddo House. The clerk was behind the desk. Bess was sitting on the lounge in the lobby, her eyes closed in weariness. Quietly Oklahoma eased himself down on the lounge beside her. Bess opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"In a couple of weeks now the boys at the ranch will start getting ready for winter," she remarked sleepily. "There will be cattle to move from one range to another. The creek bottoms and cane brakes to round-up in. Hard work, but necessary to get the herds through the winter in good shape."

"Why, that's right," he said. "Uh—Bess would you be rested enough to start out of Hackberry tomorrow afternoon? Seems like we ought to get back to the ranch in time to do some of that work ourselves."

Bess smiled at him more brightly. She was contented now. Oklahoma was going home.

AMBUSH BOUNTY

Jim waded into him

By

CLIFF WALTERS

BITTERNESS gnawed at the heart of the lean, tall man who sat in his homestead cabin and gazed moodily at the two sandstone markers standing so stark and grim on the little knoll across Ledge Creek. Bitterness, not fear, although Jim Carlyle couldn't help wondering how long it would be before a third headstone would loom from that knoll. One that would bear his name—and close a dark chapter written in blood. Well, if his two old sidekicks, gangling, good-natured Rusty Hale and tow-headed, husky Bill Sanderson, were as good company in death as they had been in life, and on the long trail silvered with the dust of bawling herds. . . .

The husk of a burned-out cigarette in his hand, Jim remembered the day that he and his pards had made the fatal mistake of quitting a herd moving north. The inseparable trio had halted their horses on the west rim of Lodge Creek Valley, had smiled down upon the stirrup-tall grass, the clear stream, the sheltering rimrocks, and had agreed, "This is it!"

"It" meant the kind of range that makes a cowpuncher want to stop trailing and settle down; lush range he starts building air castles on long before he gets the sill logs laid for his cabin. Not that any of the trio had admitted to air castles or dreams that day. It had just been happy-go-lucky cowboy banter. Gangling Rusty had said age before beauty, and he'd take the best of the three homesteads. Handsome Bill Sanderson had wondered where three nesters would eventually find wives, hoping that Jim's and Rusty's wouldn't be too jealous of his—which would be only natural, of course.

Then, three homesteads filed on. A wagon, burdened with logs and corral poles, creaking down the road on the nearby mountain slope. Axe blisters and, often, adversity. Barbed wire and beans hauled from Grassville, ten miles to the south. Hard work and banter. Three men working shoulder to shoulder, toiling toward the day when a trio of proved-up-on homesteads could be welded into a ranch three loyal men would share alike.

There was a mild open winter, and a trio of riders fogging wild horses across rugged range, sifting out the best of the saddle stock and trading broke horses for a few cows and calves when Spring greened the hills. Then tragedy, a bolt from the clear April sky.

Tow-headed Bill Sanderson, who had ridden Jim's buckskin horse, Moccasin, to Grassville one day to buy some much-

JIM CARLYLE FIGHTS TO AVENGE TWO SADDLE PARDS!

needed coffee and baking powder, had come staggering home afoot, with the left side of his shirt a red smear. He had collapsed as Rusty and Jim had run toward him.

"Sorry, Jim," he had said gritting his strong white teeth. "I couldn't be— trusted with—your buckskin. But some pale-eyed coyote— He was shootin' from the cedars—just beyond— Too late—for talk. So long—you and Rusty. See you—see you—"

That was all. Jim had saddled a horse and spurred along Bill's back-trail, a red-spattered trail rapidly dimming in the dusk. But he had found no trace of a pale-eyed coyote who had shot from ambush. No trace of Moccasin, the finest horse he had ever owned; a horse as sure-footed as a goat, as fleet as an antelope, and with a heap of cow savvy in his shapely, short-eared head.

In darkness deeper than that imposed by the April night, Jim had ridden on into Grassville, had sought the resident deputy sheriff, Chris Vannoy. But Vannoy was gone. He and two other riders were out scouring the hills for "Cat" Strang, notorious outlaw who had killed a sheriff over in the next county only two days ago. . . .

JIM CARLYLE'S dark eyes shifted as a heavy-shouldered man came up the creek trail. Hesitantly, big Paul Stafford stepped into Jim's cabin.

"I kinda looked for you over at my place for supper, Jim. I cooked up a couple antelope steaks."

"Sorry," Jim said. "Eatin' kinda skipped my mind tonight. Anyhow, I'm sorta poor company, Stafford."

"You wouldn't be if—" Big, red-faced Stafford, who had filed on the homestead lost by the sudden death of Bill Sanderson, shifted his weight uncomfortably from one lumpy boot to the other.

"Sit down and say it," Jim said flatly. "Tell me I'm a fool for keepin' to myself like a hermit. Tell me to forget a couple of sidekicks that was murdered within a month of each other, one by a pale-eyed coyote named Cat Strang—and the other probably, as far as I know, by the same!"

"Cat Strang's likely a long ways from here by now, on your buckskin horse," said the visitor, settling his bulk on a creaking chair. "I'd stop worryin' about him if I was you, Jim. Stop dreadin' that he might be hidin' behind every cedar on the range, ready to drill you."

"If I was as scared as you think I am, I'd pull up and run," Jim answered. "Give somebody a chance to grab *my* homestead. Have you got any more brothers, Stafford?"

The big man glanced uneasily at his host. "I'm sorry you feel the way you do about things," he replied. "I could see you didn't cotton to the idea of me filin' on Bill Sanderson's place—or my brother, Pete, movin' in on Rusty Hale's place. But somebody was bound to settle on land as fine as this, Carlyle. And Pete's got a wife and kids to look out for."

"I didn't squawk about you and your brother movin' in, did I?" Jim countered, wishing he didn't dislike Paul Stafford so much.

"You couldn't very well," Stafford said. "It was first come, first served. Oh, well. A hundred years from now we'll none of us know the difference, eh? In the meantime, though, I feel kinda sorry for my old boss, J. P. Strang. It's mighty disgraceful for a good, square-shootin' gent like he is to have an outlaw brother like Cat Strang draggin' the name through the mire. J. P.'s about as upset as you are, Carlyle, about the killin' of Bill Sanderson and Rusty Hale."

"Upset about the killin's, or havin' his name tarnished with gunsmoke?" Jim queried. "Never havin' met the big, prosperous cowman over in the next valley, I wouldn't know. I thought maybe he'd have the decency to ride past here some day and talk things over. Now, if I never see him, it'll be soon enough."

Stafford launched a defense of J. P. Strang, stockman and banker. He was an upright, hard-working man of fine character. And everybody in Grassville would say the same.

"Yeah, I've heard 'em," Jim cut in, and his tone was brittle. "But why are you worshipin' at Mr. Strang's feet? He took a run-down outfit away from you and your thirsty brother, Pete, didn't he?"

"That was our fault," Stafford answered quickly. "We was both drinkin' too much —on borrowed money. Win or lose, a man's got to be fair about things. J. P.'s as square a shooter as his outlaw brother's a quick shooter. J. P.'s—"

"If you've come here to visit, let's talk about something besides J. P.," Jim interrupted.

The bulky guest rose. "You're in no mood to visit, Carlyle," he said. "You never are. *If* you ever are, come over and see me. And if there's anything I can ever do for you, let me know. That's the kind of a neighbor I am. . . . So long."

The next morning Jim saddled a slim sorrel horse he was breaking, and went to look for a cow and calf he had missed from the pitifully small bunch that bore his brand. He rode past the knoll with the two markers of crude sandstone on it. He didn't keep to the trail he had started to follow. His neighbor, Paul Stafford, was driving a team along that wheel-marked thoroughfare, apparently going up to Cedar Slope to get himself a load of firewood.

It was two hours later when Jim, his dark eyes ever alert, picked up the trail of a cow and calf. A trail that led into rough, cedar-grown terrain, the same country where Rusty Hale had ridden alone the day a bullet had plowed through his chest, a dark day when hard-falling rain had beaten out all tracks.

Realizing that he was a bit tense in his saddle, that his roving gaze was forever probing around, Jim Carlyle felt the smarting sting of resentment kindling within him. The peace and security that he and Bill and Rusty had hoped to find here had been denied them. And now Jim, the one surviving member of that luckless trio, had to ride like a hunted man instead of an honest homesteader. Waiting for another gun bolt from the blue, wondering at what instant the pungent tang of sage and cedar would be tainted with the acrid, burning smell of gunsmoke—and why.

At that moment, Jim glimpsed a movement among the nearby cedars, a vague splotch of yellow. He leaped from his saddle just as a bullet screamed above the pricked-up ears of his ungentle sorrel.

He was yanking his six-shooter from leather as the terrified sorrel broke, wheeled on his hind legs and galloped back down the trail. But Jim paid no heed to his fleeing mount.

The tall man's gaze riveted on the spot from which that treacherous bullet had come.

NOW a second shot was spraying sand and wood from the old stump of a dead cedar behind which Jim had taken refuge.. But the ambusher had partially stepped from behind a shielding tree to fire that shot.

Jim's gun roared, its echoes rippling hard against the hillsides of this draw below the wagon trail. A third shot fired at Jim was wild because the thin, pale-eyed man who had fired it was sagging a little. Jim, the glint of battle lust in his dark eyes, pulled the trigger of his own gun again. The pale-eyed man lurched forward and fell to the ground.

But Jim didn't see him fall. His gun was whipping around for a shot at a second ambusher who had started firing at him. The skin from the upper part of his left arm was torn open by a bullet. Again Jim's gun lanced out with a leaden fang that bit deeply into the body of another pale-eyed man, and sent him spinning around and down.

A groan burst from the fallen man's twitching lips as he rolled over and tried to level his gun at Jim. He didn't get the chance to pull the trigger. Jim let him have it again, hard through the left side of his chest The fallen man jerked. His right spur dug deeply into the sand that was fast turning red.

Jim slipped more shells into his gun, and waited. But all was still except for a buckskin horse, and a bay with a pack on, that stood tethered deep in the cedar thicket through which pale wisps of gunsmoke sifted. Jim moved forward slowly; looked at one pale-eyed man and then the other. He knew that the first one he had killed was Cat Strang. There was the long scar on his jaw, an identifying memento of a day when Cat Strang had been more fortunate in a gun battle. The other man was his brother, J. P. Strang, respected livestock grower.

Jim moved on toward the two horses tied in the thicket. Gently he said to the buckskin, "Howdy, Moccasin. Long time no see." And he stroked the neck of the best horse he had ever owned, a horse that showed signs of hard riding. The buckskin seemed to like the feel of that gentle hand. He stopped quivering, and rubbed his shapely head against the shoulder of his erstwhile master.

Jim stepped back, listened. He could

hear the rumble of an old wagon over on the trail atop the ridge. It was getting nearer.

Several minutes later big Paul Stafford, his red face still redder from the exertion of fast walking, came upon the spot where Jim Carlyle was wrapping the body of Cat Strang in the tarpaulin that he had taken off the bay pack horse. Stafford's mouth flopped open. Jim watched the approaching man closely.

"What's the matter, neighbor?" he asked. "You look all upset."

"Why not?" the other blurted. "Thuh—there's been a killin', ain't there? I heard shots and— Who's that you're wrappin' up in that tarpaulin?"

Jim stooped, pulled the tarp away from a dead man's head.

"The gent I've been prayin' to meet—Mr. Strang."

"Huh!" Stafford stared for a long moment. Then he blurted, "Strang—yeah! But not *Cat* Strang. Carlyle, you fool!" He choked up.

"What's wrong?" Jim queried.

"You've murdered J. P. Strang! That's what's wrong!"

"Yeah?" Jim said blankly.

"Yeah! You've murdered an innocent man, you hate-locoed nester! Wait till the folks in Grassville hear about this!"

"Golly!" Jim exclaimed. "I thought—Of course, as I told you last night, I've never seen J. P. Strang. I thought this pale-eyed gent—"

"Listen, Carlyle," Stafford broke in. You've made a mistake that could cost you your life. The best thing you can do is ketch that sorrel horse that got away from you—and start ridin'. Fast! I'll go get my wagon and take J. P. to town. Tell folks what happened."

Silent for a long moment, Jim said, "Well, all right. But this is an awful disappointment to me, Stafford. Here I thought I was goin' to collect the thousand dollar reward on Cat Strang. And now. . . ."

"Now you'd better start runnin' and never come back!" Stafford said.

IT WAS past noon when Jim Carlyle tied his buckskin and a bay pack horse in the grove of trees just below the little range town of Grassville. He walked leisurely from there toward the home of the deputy sheriff, Chris Vannoy. A wagon driven by big Paul Stafford was stopping in front of the house.

Suddenly excitement was a tide, catching the townsfolk in its undertow.

"Here's Cat Strang, Chris!" Stafford was shouting. "Take a look at him, everybody! And then fork over that thousand cash to me, Chris!"

Stafford, loosening the rope that bound the tarpaulin, suddenly froze. Then Chris Vannoy's shrill voice came to Jim, who stood unseen near the corner of the deputy's house:

"That ain't Cat Strang, you half-drunk fool, Stafford! That's J. P. Strang!"

"J. P.?" echoed a voice from the crowd. "Yeah, it is! And Stafford, the whisky-guzzlin' fool—"

"Lynch him!" bellowed another voice.

"Wait!" Stafford quavered. "There's been a mistake! But J. P. Strang ain't the fine, upright citizen you think he is! He's worse than his brother, Cat. It was J. P. that hired Cat to kill them two homesteaders—Rusty Hale and Bill Sanderson. J. P. wanted them nesters, and Jim Carlyle, put away. He wanted Lodge Creek. J. P. hired me and Pete to grab them homesteads left by Hale and Sanderson! Don't lynch *me!* I'm no worse'n—"

"He's lyin', tryin' to save his dirty neck!" yelled a bystander.

"No, he ain't!" cut in the harsh voice of Jim Carlyle. And, hand close to his gun, he moved into view of the crowd.

"You dirty scum!" Stafford bellowed at him. "It was Cat Strang's carcass you showed me up there in the cedars! But it was J. P.'s you had all wrapped up in a tarp when I got back there with my wagon!"

"That's right," Jim said, while people gaped in awe at him. "I've got Cat Strang's body, too—on a bay pack horse down there in those trees. Him and the noble J. P. was both tryin' to kill me from ambush, like they murdered my sidekicks. But I was luckier than Rusty and Bill. I got the chance to shoot back—and straight. Thanks for blurtin' out the truth about your boss, the great J. P. Strang. He's all you said he was, Stafford. And if any man here wants to call me a liar, let him start!"

Nobody started. Nobody wanted to. A moment later Paul Stafford had told more

truth about J. P. Strang. But when he had finished saving his own neck, he still resented the trick Jim had played on him; and made the mistake of voicing his resentment. It was then that Jim waded into him with fists. While the crowd gaped, he beat his treacherous neighbor into a bloody pulp that finally toppled, unconscious, into the dust of Grassville's street. . . .

Later, Chris Vannoy said, "You get the thousand reward on Cat, Jim Carlyle. Too bad there wasn't a bigger reward on his scum brother, the *noble* J. P. Strang that's had us all fooled for so long!"

When Jim rode up to his corral that night and pulled the saddle off Moccasin, he glanced again at the knoll bearing the two markers. He wished he could tell Rusty and Bill what had happened today. Maybe they would rest easier, knowing that he had settled a score for them. And that, from now on, he could ride the Lodge Creek range in peace.

And maybe they would be glad to know that some of a dangerously-earned thousand dollars was going to buy new headstones for them. Monuments that would forever mark the loyalty among three men who had followed the trail together, a trail silvered with the dust of bawling herds.

THE TRAIL BOSS

(Continued from page 7)

hand, Poker Face Partridge, how it was that so many just plain early day cowboys became so adept at handling six guns.

"No windies, mind you. What's the real dope on shooting straight with hand guns?"

Partridge looked hurt.

"You don't want to hear about Harry Upjohn—good friend of mine too—who was so accurate he could fire one slug up in the air and hit it with the second when it come down?"

"No."

"Nor about Johnny Pincheck. He had the blacksmith in Wells bend the barrel of his 'Texas' model Colt so's it would shoot around corners? Sneaky hombre, Johnny."

"Unh-uh."

"What about Pete Dator? He had himself a turret gun. The cylinder turned flat around a vertical center instead of the usual up and down cylinder."

I shook my head firmly, and Poker Face grinned.

"Got you there, sonny. There really was such a gun, but it wasn't much account."

The Old Turret

Checking later I found Poker Face Partridge was right. The old "Turret" or "Monitor" gun was one of the very first revolvers developed. It was manufactured by a firm by the name of Allen and Cochran and a few of these pancake cylindered curiosities reached the West as far back as the late 1830's. Maybe Pete Dator did own one. He could have. If he did it is a museum piece today.

"Mostly," declared Poker Face, ready to get down to cases after he had his little joke, "good six-gun shooting is a lot of practise, and a couple of important don'ts. The number of what you might call run-of-the-mill oldtime Westerners who were potent hand gun users pretty well exploded the myth that a fellow had to be something special to be a good revolver shot.

"All the majority of those Westerners had was average eyesight, normal nerves and a natural interest in preserving their own hides in time of danger. Same as you and me.

"If you are thinking of the records of the more famous and much ballyhooed saloon brawlers and personal gun-fighters both inside the law and out, don't forget most of their six-gun shooting was actually done at mighty close range. Maybe as close as ten yards, or twenty at most. Even a little man is a big target at that distance.

"What those fellows really stressed, and became experts at, was speed on the draw and getting in the first shot. The split-second time factor was what counted more than target range accuracy."

Don't Flinch!

Poker Face paused for a moment.

"Besides the 44-40 slugs used in the popular Frontier Model single action Colt were no puny 22's. They could seriously inconven-

ience a fellow no matter where he was hit—if he wasn't outright dead.

"Getting back to being a good hand-gun shooter the first 'don't' I'd harp on is don't flinch when you squeeze the trigger. Flinching is fatal to accuracy. It yanks the muzzle of the gun up, down or to one side and you can miss a barn door at twenty paces with that kind of shooting.

"Flinching is mostly impulse. It comes subconsciously when the hammer starts to drop on a live load. I've heard experts argue 'til doomsday as to just why this is. But I never did hear them come to any agreed-on answer.

"It could be anticipating the recoil, instinctively ducking the noise or plain nervousness. 'Relax' is easier to say than accomplish, especially when somebody is blazing away at you with homicide in view. But it is the best answer to overcoming the flinching habit I know. Practise and good nerves are wonderful assets."

Partridge let that sink in.

Finger Muscle Control

"The second 'don't' is more a matter of finger muscle control than nerves. It's fundamental too. Don't pull the trigger with the jerk that results from the average amateur's sudden desire to fire quickly once he has sights and target lined up together—or thinks he has. You'd be surprised how far off the mark that impulsively fired bullet winds up once the hammer has fallen on the cartridge.

"The antidote is to tighten your trigger-finger gradually around the trigger until it trips the hammer and the gun lets go. Experts agree about the best way to do this is not simply to tighten the finger crooked around the trigger but to squeeze with your whole hand, exerting pressure on the stock of the gun and the trigger at the same time. That way there is a minimum shift of movement in the gun muzzle and the front sight as the gun is fired.

Dry Shooting

"The rest," Partridge concluded abruptly, "is application. Day in and day out practise.

"You don't need to shoot at tin cans or expend live bullets all the time either. Dry shooting—just dropping the hammer on an empty gun—will do as well. It won't injure the gun, but be sure your weapon is empty before you start.

"Dry shooting is really practise in trigger pull and flinch control because the flincher will tend to jerk his gun muzzle at the hammer impact whether the gun is loaded or not. Moreover this type of practise is training that helps to eliminate two main faults that once overcome can make most any man a better than average hand gun marksman.

"It did in the early days of the West when packing a gun and knowing how to use it was often the only life insurance an hombre carried."

When it came to talking about six guns Poker Face Partridge could make sense—if he was hog-tied down to it.

See you all again, next TRIPLE WESTERN time!

—THE TRAIL BOSS.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE Trail Boss and his crew have been right busy as usual, cutting from the big herd of Western books that come into the old home corral the three choice novels of the bunch. And when you get your next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN, we're inclined to think you'll agree that the boys did themselves proud, because for prime, rare beef, it would take a heap of wrangling to beat the three books they've roped out for you.

They carry well-known brands, these three, burned on plain enough for all hands to read. But have a look for yourselves:

SHADOW ON THE RANGE
By Norman A. Fox

FOUR ACES and A MISDEAL
By W. C. Tuttle

BUCK PETERS, RANCHMAN
By Clarence E. Mulford

Taking 'em as they come, many of you will no doubt recall some of the other top-notch novels by Norman A. Fox that have appeared in TRIPLE WESTERN, such as THE THUNDERING TRAIL and THE FEATHERED SOMBRERO. A writer of fine, hard-hitting Westerns is Mr. Fox, and in SHADOW ON THE RANGE he upholds in

great style this reputation as a first-class story teller.

The book is about a young doctor, Brian Ives, who was never able to learn who his parents were, but who returns to the cattle king who raised him, Colonel Carridine, when he gets word of bad trouble brewing on the Colonel's far-flung range empire. The Colonel was on the point of warring against the nesters edging his great Hammer spread, and Dr. Brian Ives could see no good in it at all.

The Changing West

He tries to convince the Colonel that the West was changing, that farms and barbed wire were coming to stay and in ever increasing numbers, but the Colonel was of the old school of cattlemen who had always fought for what they regarded as their own and could see no reason now for change. And so the shadow over the range grew darker, ever more ominous.

Associated with Hammer as he was, the young doctor was given trouble by the nesters from the start. He tangled with Cory Lund, son of Elisha Lund, the leader of the nesters, and was shortly thereafter bushwacked on his way out from the town of Tamerlane. He was only half conscious when a pretty, roguish girl came along and helped him onto the seat of the buggy he'd been driving.

The girl seems to have vanished then; she was tying her saddler behind the buggy. She came back into his range of vision, tossing his hat into the buggy and climbing in and tugging at him again, forcing him to a sitting position. She unwrapped the reins from around the whipstock and said, "Where to?"

"Hammer," he said

She turned her head, her eyes startled and a little afraid. "Then you'd be Dr. Ives," she said. "I should have figured that out."

He said, "You're one of those nesters, I'd guess. If you're afraid of Hammer, I'll make out alone."

Her eyes became steel. "I'm not afraid of Hammer," she said.

"Good for you," he said, but it was lost in the clatter of the wheels. She had clucked the horse into motion and they were off down the road.

It wasn't till after she'd got him to Hammer and departed that he learned her name. "Tana" Carridine told him. Tana, short for Montana, the tall and lovely black-haired girl who was the only blood heir to the Colonel. Dave Carridine, her father, had been killed years before under mysterious circumstances which Ives had always felt cloaked the disappearance of his father as well. Because no one could tell him, though, he could only guess at this last.

"That girl?" Tana said. "Why, she's Marybelle Lund. She's new here since your time, Brian."

"Lund," he repeated, wondering where he'd heard the name, and then it came to him. He began to laugh. Cory Lund. She was Cory Lund's sister!

A Rough Road

Ives tried to make peace between the nesters and Colonel Carridine, but it was a tough road he chose, because the Colonel couldn't see why he shouldn't fight these encroachers on his range, and because they in turn refused to believe that the young doctor was more than a Hammer spy.

There were times when he came to think maybe guns were the only answer, and that maybe he should throw away the black doctor's bag that made him a neutral, choose a side and cut loose with them. But the little faith he gained through Marybelle Lund with the nesters and through Tana on the Hammer side made him keep trying despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation.

Then a typhoid epidemic gained him some time—enough time to learn some facts that threw an entirely different light on the impending war and on his own identity. You'll be shocked and then shocked again by the strange twists that change the course of this grand novel. It holds suspense that will haunt you till you finish it, and together with action aplenty and a deep and moving love interest, we predict that you'll rate SHADOW ON THE RANGE among the best Western novels you've ever read.

A Tuttle Yarn

Number Two on the list of authors who will be entertaining you in the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN needs no introduction to readers of Westerns anywhere. For the wit and humor of W. C. Tuttle's writings, coupled with his flare for graphic, rip-snort-

ing action, have made him easily one of the most popular Western authors of the day.

In FOUR ACES AND A MISDEAL you'll ride with four of the toughest, funniest, warmest-hearted waddies that ever blew down the trail. Except for "Leather" Kleig, who was more or less the unofficial boss of the foursome, they weren't much to look at. But what they couldn't do with a gun, a rope and a running iron, as they themselves would tell you at the drop of a bottle cork, wasn't hardly worth doing.

They had been working for old Nick Ralls' broken-down NR spread under a rather strange verbal agreement. They wouldn't get paid till the herd they had built up for Nick—by means of an exceedingly casual running iron that had a way of altering into an NR burn most any brand that chanced to stray within roping distance—was sold. But before Nick could get around to selling the herd he just up and died on them.

High and Dry

"Which leaves us high and dry," said Chet Wells, "with nothin' to show for all our hard work. If you was to ask me, I'd suggest we all line up, give the word and start shooting. If there's any survivors amongst us, he can take what money the other fellers has got and pull out."

"Good idea!" seconded "Wooden-shoe" Van Dorn. "I'd like to—"

"You would!" interrupted "Wheezer" Bell sarcastically. "You ain't got a danged cent to lose. Leather must have about six-bits, which is a good four-bits more than I've got. I dunno about Chet, but I reckon two-bits would about tap him,"

"Then that idea ain't so good," said Chet mournfully. "What'll we do? Brand the NR cows all over and sell 'em to the sheriff?"

"Being funny ain't getting us no place." Wheezer dug his heel into the hard dirt of the yard. "The question is, just what are we going to do? If Nick didn't leave no will, I s'pose the whole works will be sold by the sheriff."

"I'd love to set on a fence and see the sheriff sell my cows!" Leather exploded.

"What would you do about it?" asked Wheezer. "Would you tell him how it comes you feel so bad about it, Leather?"

"Talkin' makes me hungry," said Wooden-shoe. "Let's go see what Ma Coogan's got for supper."

"And that's another thing," said Wheezer. "What's going to become of Ma now?"

"Yessir," agreed Wooden-shoe solemnly, "that's another thing."

Drastic Measures

The others nodded, gravely considering this latest problem. For Ma Coogan, cook and housekeeper of the NR, was as much a part of the ranch as the old ranchhouse. She was Irish as the Blarney Stone and with a heart of pure gold, but they knew because of her age—she was about sixty—that she wouldn't have an easy time landing another job somewhere.

It was for her cause, even more than their own, that the boys took drastic measures when they learned that old Nick Ralls had bequeathed the ranch to a distant relative, a statuesque brunette in city clothes who insisted on calling the place a farm, and who would have done away entirely with the existing personnel of the ranch had she been able. She did fire them all, in fact, but they wouldn't stay fired, and neither the sheriff nor the lawyer who advised the pretty new owner were able to cope with the kind of fight that rugged quartet of cowpokes put up.

You'll get plenty of laughs and bullet-fast action, and plenty of surprises out of W. C. Tuttle's very human novel, FOUR ACES AND A MISDEAL. We think you'll enjoy it thoroughly. We did.

Hopalong Cassidy!

And last but by no means the least of the three swell books in store for you in the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN is a Hopalong Cassidy novel by Clarence E. Mulford. Other Hopalong books we've published, such as HOPALONG CASSIDY AND THE EAGLE'S BROOD and THE BAR 20 RIDES AGAIN, drew such a warm reception from you readers that we've made a special effort to bring him back again.

In BUCK PETERS, RANCHMAN, which is the title of this latest Hopalong adventure, Mr. Mulford takes us up into Montana country. Buck Peters was half owner of a ranch there which had long lay abandoned. His partner had since died, and Buck was now interested in reviving the old ranch. But there were plenty of men opposed to his

plan, he found. Men who would and did stoop to most of the accepted forms of skullduggery to stop him.

His enemies, however, overlooked one thing— his friends. And Buck Peters had good friends. Men like Hopalong Cassidy and Tex Ewalt, and in a tall, blond Englishman, a newcomer, H. Whitby Booth, who didn't know much about the West but learned fast and was a man clear down into his shoes. Also, there was a girl. She was prettier than anything in seven counties around, but he couldn't be sure just whose game she was playing. Rose La France her name was. They called her the French Rose.

Despite the help of Buck's friends, though, the enemy had more help, and things get mighty hot and heavy around the Double Y. with a lot of bullets thrown and a lot of bullets stopped by human flesh before this exciting novel is brought to a close. It's good reading, folks, and no mistake. Neither Hoppy nor his creator, Mr. Mulford, has ever let us down, and after reading BUCK PETERS, RANCHMAN, we think you'll agree there's

[*Turn page*]

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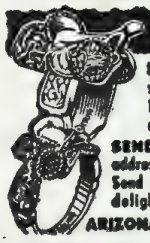

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small chance they ever will. They just know that old cow country too well.

Besides the three big feature novels we've briefly told you about, the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN will also contain the usual careful selection of entertaining articles and short stories, plus the regular departments, of course. So if you want to tie onto a big batch of thrilling, colorful Western reading, look forward to our next issue.

FROM OUR READERS

WE HAVE had many letters, both pro and con, on John Edward Dalton's "The End of the Trail" which we published in our February issue. This was Dalton's account of how Pat Garrett met his death, if you'll recall, and to those who took exception to his version of it we asked Mr. Dalton to reply, substantiating his position as an authority on the subject.

One of the most vociferous in his denunciation of the article was Eugene H. Mitchell of Dallas, Texas. And as proof of the convincing defense of his facts that Mr. Dalton made, we publish the subsequent reply we received from Mr. Mitchell:

Dear Editor: Reckon I stuck my neck out when I challenged the authenticity of Mr. Dalton's "The End of The Trail." I have read his reply carefully and am now convinced of his truthfulness and intend telling him so. Seriously, I wish to thank you for the interest and attention you gave my letter. The more I read of your magazines, the more certain I become that the THRILLING group is the best on the market. You may have your faults (and who doesn't?)

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but you certainly do your best to keep your readers happy.

And now it's our turn to say thank you, Eugene Mitchell for your interest in getting the true picture of the old West and for your praise of our magazines. We're pretty careful as to the authenticity of the stuff we print, as you now know, but realize of course that we're not infallible and really welcome criticism which has some fairly sound basis, as did yours.

A letter from up New England way, from Don Cablemire of Augusta, Maine, makes us happy.

Says Don:

Dear Editor: I'm a dyed-in-the-wool TRIPLE WESTERN fan. And why shouldn't I be, or anyone else who likes good Westerns, I ask you?

[*Turn page*]

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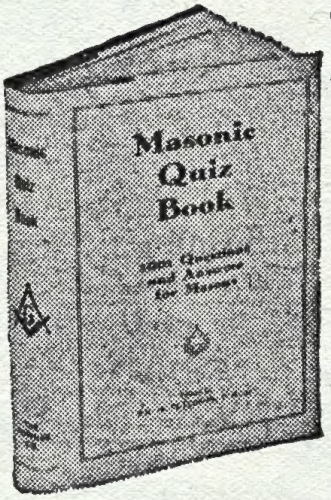

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